In a market place or on main street you are mine

by wildechilde17

Summary

It is after all the place you go to celebrate a victory.

Beginning in Disneyland of all places, following on from Unfinished Business and The Avengers, this story follows Clint and Natasha through the damage inflicted by Loki into The Winter Soldier and Age of Ultron. This story is about men and women loving each other without being totally derailed by it.

“I’m not broken.”

“Yes, you are. You were broken when you held me against a wall with an arrow tip and you are broken now. The only difference is today we have breaks in the same places.” He nods along with each word she says and she feels as if each one is punctuated with his unspoken,
‘yeah, but’. She sighs before adding, “He carries the reminders of every glove that laid him down.” It's an odd turn of phrase and she sees it catch him off guard, his eyes narrow and he frowns.

“I know that… why do I know that?”

“The Boxer.”

“Huh yeah.” He huffs and then his top lip pulls up in one corner before he asks, “Why do you know that?”

“I can know things, Barton.”

“Simon and Garfunkel?”

“I know things.”

“You know everything,” he says, a little less a growl than everything that has preceded it and he steps forward.
In a Marketplace

He throws his head back and laughs when she puts the ears on. There are still circles under his eyes. They are his special version of blue and not red raw like they were on the security tapes she’d scrutinized or in the face that turned on her bow in hand, but they are tired and lined. She cocks her head to the side and tries to hide the fact that it worries her.

“Hot damn, Red! That’s a look and a half.” She pulls them off and shakes out her curls.

“Shut it, Barton.” He puts his hand to his mouth as he laughs again, the seam of a vein running down his forearm, up his bicep and under his t-shirt. He fiddles with his SHIELD cell in his other hand.

“You put them on. You actually put them on. I gotta get a picture. Nat, put ’em back on so I can get a picture.”

“Put them on yourself.” She swings the offending hat around on her finger as she speaks. “These don’t even have my name on them. Did you steal them from a passing child?”

“Always with the accusations. I figured Nancy was a good cover name.”

“Nancy? Nancy would be a good cover in 1968.”

“I could call you Nan.”

“Right. And I get to call you what exactly? Biff? Chip?” She asks pulling the names from memories of American TV shows that formed part of a training program that was the exact opposite of the pearls and twinsets she’d watched with calculating eyes.

“Sexy?” he suggests, smirking at her as he raising his brows suggestively. There is so much noise, tinny sounds of music pumped through loud speakers, children squealing and adults arguing. The crowds and the noise are putting her on edge but it isn’t only them. She’d be more comfortable in a busy market in Marrakesh with a mark and an objective than here in this.

“You wish.”

“Why’d ya put them on?” His voice drops and takes on the serious growl that she’d rather not hear. “Not in a million years did I think you were actually gonna put them on.” He shakes his head and his eyebrows lower. Stupid man always looking for patterns.

“Come back here, you,” he says behind her but doesn’t grab at her, instead stuffing his hands into his pockets. “Why’d you put the ears on, Nancy?”

“Why not?” she says as she turns back to him.

“Because it’s beneath you? Because I wanted you too? Because you have too much grace and class
for my kinda shit?” He purses his lips slightly and looks like he is chewing on the inside of his cheek.

“It isn’t important.” She shrugs and finds herself tucking her own hand into her pocket in mimicry of his body language. She knows it’s designed to make other people trust you and yet she catches herself doing it and knows it was not intentional, it was not a choice. She knows that she follows him and always has.

“You pitying me?” he asks, raising his chin.

“I wanted to see you smile.”

“You wanted to see me smile?” he repeats like he did not hear her.

“It’s not that complicated.”

“You put the ears on ‘cause you wanted to see me smile?” He grins and maybe it is worth the pain of him repeating her words over and over in this incredulous and victorious voice. There is stubble along his jaw line and his top lip and deep creases at the sides of his mouth.

“Will you stop saying that if I kiss you?”

“In public?” he asks. His tongue pokes from between his lips for a second and she wants to roll her eyes.

“Will you be silent?” she whispers as she pushes herself up on the balls of her feet.

“As the grave,” he mummers back, grazing his lips against hers.
He tugs on her hand. The callouses on the second distal phalanges of three of his fingers catch against her skin and she feels warm with the recognition that this is entirely specific to him and now in some small way the feel of his callouses against her hands are entirely specific to them. It itches in a place she could never scratch at, the feeling of new memories being made.

“Let’s get gone,” he says.

“We just got here.”

“Yeah,” he agrees and yet his eyes do anything but.

“There are tea cups. I have memories of giant tea cups I’ve never seen.” She licks her bottom lip as she watches him shift his weight further to his right and scratch at his chin.

“Yeah. We aren’t gonna do this.”

“Clint.”

“This isn’t right. You’re doing this… It isn’t right.”

“Don’t. Hey. Hawkeye,” she smiles for the sake of the passing mass of people and puts the mouse ears on his head. “You are usually… Impulsive… But we just got here.”

“Don’t do this to fix me,” he says gruffly, knocking the hat from his head forward into a waiting hand with the ease of someone who knows exactly how an object will fall.

“No.”

“I’m saying…”

“I understood what you said.”

“I’m saying…” he tries again looking more frustrated and edgy each moment they stand here.

“I am saying don’t make me say I want to be here,” she cuts across him softly, “I am saying don’t make me feel guilty for wanting to be with you. I am saying I can want you to be happy. I can want that.”

“Yeah.”

“Laughing about mouse ears isn’t the same as pretending you aren’t broken.”

“I’m not broken.”

“Yes, you are. You were broken when you held me against a wall with an arrow tip and you are broken now. The only difference today is we have breaks in the same places.” He nods along with each word she says and she feels as if each one is punctuated with his unspoken ‘yeah, but’. She sighs before adding, “He carries the reminders of every glove that laid him down.” It’s an odd turn of phrase and she sees it catch him off guard, his eyes narrow and he frowns. “I know that… why do I know that?”

“The Boxer.”
“Huh, yeah.” He huffs and then his top lip pulls up in one corner before he asks, “Why do you know that?”

“I can know things, Barton.”

“Simon and Garfunkel?”

“I know things.”

“You know everything,” he says, a little less a growl than everything that has preceded it and he steps forward.

“The fighter still remains, Barton, the fighter still remains.”

“You remember the rest of that song? It’s not a hopeful song, Tasha.”

“No,” Natasha answers lower than the noise of the crowd and the music but enough that he can hear her. They are not hopeful people; they are people looking for a job and some comfort there.

“You wanted tea cups?” he shrugs tiredly.

“You brought me here. I believe I am owed tea cups.”
His feet are flat, his hips are anchored, he breathes out coming to the bottom of his breath and then he pulls back on the trigger gradually… or doesn’t… he hasn’t been given the order. He stares down the sight and runs his checks again. It is the deadliest tai chi practice.

The rifle is perfectly calibrated to him but she is like a second favorite child always disregarded in favor of her sibling hidden under the tarp to his left, a black recurve bow. It isn’t the type of weapon you use on a job like this they’d told him, predictably distrustful of his proficiency with a bow and arrow. Coulson to his credit had merely paused and then allowed that she would have handlers just like he did and they would be most interested in the cause of the loss of their highly trained asset. An arrow is a calling card in this day and age and a sniper rifle is not.

That red hair is easy to find in the crowd, he doesn’t understand why she hasn’t changed it. He hasn’t, admittedly, given it much thought preferring the Zen practice of his checks. But the occasional question does ferment in the back of his mind as the hours count down. Questions like why she is in a youth hostel in a coat two sizes too large for her and why she still has red hair, such red hair.

“Coulson, you there?” he asks into his comm.


“Why is the Black Widow in a Youth Hostel?”

“Is it important?”

“No… you sure we got the right girl?”

“All our intelligence has been confirmed she is the Black Widow.”

“Yeah, so why is she in a Youth Hostel? I mean she takes down pretty important targets right? And she doesn’t do it by stealth; she does it by, well, Black Widowing shit right?” he asks his chin grazing against the stock as he talks.

“The Cold War term was honey trap I believe… don’t let that fool you. She is deadly and quite adept at disappearing.”

“Coulson, something feels off about this. She’s in a youth hostel there is no one here worth honey trapping or assassinating and it sure as fuck isn’t getting her close to someone worth black widowing, so why is she here?”

“This is a chance to take out the Black Widow. We may not get one again.” It’s an acknowledgement that he may be right, not an out and out agreement but as close as Coulson gets.

“Yeah, yeah… no one’s made contact with her in the last three days either… you don’t think that’s strange?”

“Do you believe she knows she is being watched?” These new earpieces make it sound like Coulson’s in his head. It has a strangely irritating quality to it, more so than the static feedback that he used to get. He’s kept more quiet on this mission than his handler has to be used to just so he didn’t have to hear the omnipresent Coulson tell him to shut his trap. He has enough voices in his own head telling him he is an annoying little shit without adding a new one.
“Nah, I don’t think that’s why…. What if she’s running?”

“Running?”

“Yeah, I think she’s running… I think she isn’t working for the bad guys anymore…. I think she’s running from them.”

“Your orders are to neutralize the Black Widow.”

“I know what my orders are, Coulson. I’m just saying I’m not sure she’s the Black Widow anymore.”

“Hawkeye, you will follow your orders.”

“Sir.”

“That better have been a ‘Yes Sir’."

“Sir.”

Her hair whips round her face as she exits the café at the front of the hostel, she pulls the navy coat closer and for a second he feels a sense of déjà vu. He has an image of the giant tea cups at Disneyland, the ones you can ride in and this girl’s red hair caught in between her lips. It’s so odd that his breath stops and he finds himself resetting and checking his feet are flat, his hips are anchored and he releases his breath again trying to center himself before they call green.

And she looks up. Straight up at the roof, almost a kilometer away, where he lies and her eyes widen.

“Shit.” There is no way she just did that. One one thousand.

“Hawkeye?” Two one thousand.

“She made me,Sir. Black Widow just made me.” Three one thousand.

She turns, fast and clever, weaves herself into the crowd making her difficult to separate from the bystanders. He can hear Coulson relay his recon down the line. Four one thousand. Five one thousand. Down to the bottom of your breath.

“You are green, Hawkeye. If you have a clear line take it.” And she is in front of the alley way for an instant the crowd parts and he can take the shot, he pulls back on the trigger gradually. Almost a kilometer away the girl with the red hair and the navy coat two sizes too big crumples in a heap and people scream.

“The Black Widow is down,” he reports in the voice of someone who knows that they take the bad guys out, this is what they do. Seven one thousand, eight one thousand, and then he begins to scream.

This isn’t how it happened. The girl with the red hair and the navy coat two sizes too big made him but she didn’t run and when he was green he didn’t take the shot. He didn’t. Her head didn’t snap back like that and her body didn’t stay standing for a fraction of a second before hitting pavement.

The scream tears at his throat.

“Clint!” the voice of the girl with the red hair and the wide green eyes calls his name. “Clint Barton wake up! You’re having a nightmare. Wake up!”
When he opens his eyes, twisting on the bed, the girl is there.

“No. I killed you,” he says though he knows that isn’t right.

“Yet here I stand,” she says in a t-shirt two sizes too big and red hair illuminated by a bare bulb.

“Tasha?”
“You’ll be okay, Clint,” she says, her voice a little thick with sleep still.

“You? When exactly will that be?” he says shaking himself roughly on the bed before sliding up against the pillows, scrunched and boxed by his movement.

“When you find your level,” Natasha glides a finger around the edge of the glass of water she has collected from the en-suite gathering the condensation before handing it to him. She presses her wet fingertip to her lips unconsciously licking the moisture away when she drops her hand.

“My level, yeah? Whatever that is.”

Natasha shrugs, unwilling to explain anything to a defensive, frustrated Clint knowing all she’ll get in return is sarcastic retorts and blank refusals. “Do you want to tell me about the nightmare?” she asks instead. He gulps down the water. He always wakes thirsty from these dreams. Sweating out the external control and the false memories in a way she nearly envies.

“Not really.” He closes his eyes as he speaks. He had woken her this time, long before he’d started the shocking scream his breathing had changed from the comfortable breathing of sleep to the deep even breathing she’d seen him sink into on rooftops in a hundred cities. The change had brought her out of her own sleep. In a way she had been relieved that her normal vigilance had not left her entirely with the presence of this Clint Barton now her… the man she’d fucked soundly into a mattress a few nights before. When she’d opened her eyes he was unnaturally still on the bed beside her so she’d waited him out.

“It's 2:33 you should try to get some more sleep,” she says simply returning to her side of the bed.

“You could try a little harder you know.” He opens one eye to peer at her and his mouth twists a little.

“Would it make a difference?”

“No. I dunno. It might mean you gave a shit,” he says tiredly.

“It might mean that,” she agrees tucking her naked legs under the covers again, aware of the humidity radiating off his bare skin trapped beneath the sheets. He throws his head back harder against his pillows, his neck arching as his shoulder blades push down against the mattress.

“You are cold, Nat. Arctic cold,” he bites at her.

“Perhaps.”

“What? Nothing? Push back a little Natasha. Give me something here.” There is a little of the man who has irritated her across continents in the prodding but she doesn’t rise to it hearing too much of the piss and vinegar’s absence and the un Clint Barton like desperation that has taken its place.

“And let you, strung out on Adrenalin and Cortisol, find something real and solid to feel guilty about so you don’t have to deal with the guilt and the anxiety of imagined actions?” He stops at that and she feels the weight shift beside her as he goes to leave the bed. She closes her eyes hoping that she can hide the sudden emotional turmoil the idea that he will walk away causes in her.

She wants to stop him. She wants to tell him that she knows he is piling new guilts upon old in an
effort to rationalize the twisting feeling in his gut, that she can see he feels ashamed of the nightmare and the naked terror that wrought that scream from him. Natasha wants to tell him that she has felt it too and too many times to count it was his ridiculous face that woke her, distracted her and reminded her that redemption was possible. But on those nights he’d never said any of those things and she finds she doesn’t know how to say them now.

“I got real stuff to feel guilty and anxious about,” he growls suddenly and his weight shifts again, he has decided to stay.

“Yes. I will not be one of them Clint Barton.” When she opens her eyes again he is leaning in watching her with his blue eyes as searching as they have ever been. She stares back finding herself hoping he will find whatever it is he is looking for. He gives a brief nod before sliding back down to stare at the water damaged ceiling. He is quiet again. She curls on her side, wrapping one arm around her ribs protectively despite the quickness of their recovery.

“You hated Disneyland didn’t you?” he says behind her.

“I didn’t hate it.”

“You kinda did,” his voice has a wry note now that compels her to turn over and look for Hawkeye in those blue eyes of his, dancing with the absurdities of life.

“I did not,” she answers stubbornly fighting against the impulse. “I felt very… Russian.”

“Russian?”

“Yes.” She feels his breath against her shoulder as he pulls himself up to look at her.

“You’re not Russian anymore, Tasha.”

“Perhaps,” she answers curling on herself a little tighter.

“No perhaps about it.” His fingers graze her upper arm. She knows he is asking her to come back to him from wherever she has gone in her head. When she rolls to answer him he moves back instinctively, never crowding her.

“Sometimes I wonder,” she says softly.

“What if you didn’t hit me hard enough?”
“If this is me, then you know I never fail to hit hard enough,” she answers but knowing the humor won’t be enough Natasha echoes him saying, “I know you. This is you, stubborn, sarcastic, difficult… beautiful.”

“Beautiful? You think I’m beautiful, Romanoff?” His smile is so bright and large. She rolls her eyes.

“Egotistical.”

“Nah, no getting out of this one,” he pokes at her, “You think I’m beautiful.”

“Beautiful like a first breath with broken ribs,” she allows. He snorts.

“I’ll take it,” he chuckles, the tension in his muscles easing for the first time since he woke. Natasha bites her lip, watching him roll on to his back and stretch out wondering for a moment how he manages to slip so easily into such physical confidence.

“Will you sleep again?”

“You’re not leaving.”

“I’m not leaving.” He nods sharply at that. He closes his eyes again as he pulls her into him cradling her beneath his strong left arm. She lets him hold her there rising and falling with each breath he takes relaxing a little each time it fails to be the deep even breath of a sniper.

“I’ve only ever made a handful of good decisions in my life,” he says yawning, “You know?”

“Yes, this is why you always steal my food in restaurants.” She keeps her ear to his heart, her hand curled against his chest. She feels him chuckle briefly.

“There was a girl in a coat two sizes too big. She had red hair and she looked up and saw me on a rooftop.” She pulls back needing to see his face to be sure of what he is saying. He smiles quickly at her, a soft reassuring smile.

“She didn’t run. She could have run, but she was tired of running,” she finishes for him watching as his eyelids grow heavy.

“She was the best decision I ever made.”

“Sleep, ястреб,” she whispers. She doesn’t thank him, he knows it is a debt she will never repay. His eyes close as she rests her head back on his chest.

“Still is the best decision.”
In the morning with dull grey light filtering through the window and reflecting off the equally grey concrete car park, she wakes earlier than he does. Natasha is relieved that a second wave of nightmares has not woken him. He still looks drained and a heavy arm laid across her waist should prevent her from moving without jostling him. She is still, however, Черная вдова and if she couldn’t slip from a sleeping man’s bed she would be of little use. A quick look at her cell tells her that it is still early enough that he can sleep and they can still vacate the ugly room they took for the night and find somewhere less cheap and nasty along the road to wherever he takes them next.

He moves his arm further up her body in his sleep as he rolls on to his side making snuffling noises as his nose comes away from the pillow buried beneath his face. Beneath her breasts his hand flexes and pulls her closer, hot breath forced against her neck with his every exhale. She wonders how he became so unconsciously accustomed to being allowed to touch her in this manner. It is not that they now share a bed because they have often done so but that even asleep he senses he has permission to curl her into him, to hold her, touch her, fondle her and perhaps even love her.

She is considering that perhaps Clint Barton has been consciously preventing himself from crossing the line she had built for them for so long that it is not that he is quickly learning new ways but only giving up old rules. Artifice that she hadn’t looked for and that she had willfully ignored. She will never tell him but Clint Barton has better acting skills than she had credited him with.

She considers this and whether the stain on the terrible aqua, pink and yellow curtains examined under ultraviolet light will be revealed to be semen, blood or saliva as his hand moves higher again. His thumb slides across her breast. Like the tiny muscle in the ear that pulls back in the presence of loud noises she reacts instantly to his touch even though it is through the fabric of a loose fitting t-shirt. She licks her bottom lip and remains still. His breath has not changed, his heart rate remains slow and steady. His thumb moves again and this time it seems to strain for a moment to drag across her hardening nipple. She narrows her eyes giving him one more chance to convince her of his sleeping. His thumb moves again a little firmer than before the tip of the long digit coming to rest right on top of her nipple.

She rolls towards him. His eyes are still closed but she raises a single eyebrow and waits until a familiar smirk breaks his cover. “Enjoying yourself, Barton?” she asks.

“I did wonder how long you were gonna let me get away with it,” he says opening his eyes, blue like the North Sea.

“This behavior from the man who said we could use our particular skill sets for things other than wrong doing.”

“If this is wrong I don’t want to be right,” he says his forehead creasing and his voice dropping.

“It’s early you could sleep.”

“So could you. Besides Natasha Romanoff is in my bed. Sleep is the last thing I want when Natasha Romanoff is in my bed.” His fingers play at the stitching on the sleeve of the t-shirt she wears. He examines it intently. Fingers tugging at loose stitches stray against her skin and a small current of electricity seems to jump between blunt fingers and pale arms.

“Your bed?” she sighs.
“I paid for it, way I see it it’s mine till 11.”

“And what is the first thing you want when Natasha Romanoff is in your bed?” He stares at her lips as she frames the words. She has seen him like this before, in early morning light or dark in between hours when his eyes lose focus and blankly stare at coffee pots full of horrible American coffee, stewed and bitter, that he makes sweet with packets of granulated white sugar. It is her lips that he stares at now as though she could be made sweet from bitter and return his focus.

“More of the covers?” he answers despite the fact that they slept without sheets. His intensity dissipates with an easy shrug and a goofy grin.

“Is that so?” she asks disinterestedly as she stretches arching her back and pulling her hands above her head allowing her t-shirt rise up baring her midriff and the small panties that she’d slept in. Her nipples distort the line of the soft white fabric. She rubs her thighs together as she fakes a yawn. “Perhaps I could sleep again.”

“You are dangerous, woman,” he growls, his eyes black and hollow with want.

“Yes,” she replies as he moves. Hawkeye moves fast. He drags her t-shirt up her body even as he straddles her. She lifts her head as she twist her legs beneath his sudden weight. His mouth is open and urgent on hers before he pulls the shirt over her head. When she is bare beneath him save for the cotton panties he gives a small sound, a huff of air like a short lived claim to victory. His eyes are sharp on her body, combing over her breasts, her belly down to the dampness between her thighs.

He pushes back resting more of his weight on her thighs before running two warm hands up her sides to her breasts. Calloused fingers scribble and scrape at her nipples under his dark gaze. She shifts under his ministrations though her hands, one twisted in her hair one caught under her pillow, refuse to move. She could throw him off her, she could destroy him, instead she parts her lips and stares him down as he grasps and torments her breasts like she is a new bow to be tested and turned to his use.

“Fuck,” he says. His voice is low and dangerous and the word sounds filthy in his mouth. Natasha merely raises an eyebrow. He bends to her holding his mouth above hers like it was goddamn mistletoe. “Fuck,” he says again and twists her nipple between his thumb and his index finger until she yields and allows the shock of it to register on her face. She is enclosed with only a view of the North Sea, twined and stormy.

She moves then taking her hand from her hair and push back at him with a hand on his sternum. Her fingers splay against hard muscle, she does not push as hard as she can but he rocks back a little with a dry chuckle only to grasp her hand and force it down between them.

He is hard and she is wet. He pushes her hand against him grunting as she allows her fingers to curl around him. “Fucking dangerous. Fucking glorious.” He doesn’t kiss her again, though she stretches up against him he effortlessly keeps that small distance between them. He smirks at each of her attempts to reach him.

Firmly grasping her thighs he rolls her towards the window grinding himself against her ass as he moves behind her. There are red finger prints the size and shape of bow string fingers pressed into paleness of her skin. His body curves against her, hard, hot and bare save for the boxers she can feel him strain against.

There is a gap where the hideous curtains fail to meet. She can see a sliver of car park and a drink machine on the opposing side. A man in a Hawaiian shirt shoves the machine, green and yellow, trying to retrieve a soda can. Natasha wonders what he would think if he turned now and through the
glare caught a glimpse of her naked body and hawk eyed man with corded muscles whispering “Fuck” into her red hair.

He lifts her leg pulling it back over his own. She is open and suddenly desperate to be filled. She reaches back for him cradling his head against her neck in the crook of her arm. His mouth on her neck sends a surge of need through her body. She arches, breasts jutting from her bruised ribs and gasps. His mouth grins against her skin.

“Clint,” she says.

“My name in your mouth. Fuck,” his voice is like the beginning of an avalanche and his stubble scrapes at her jaw. “It sounds like trust, Tasha.”

“It sounds…” he cups her between their entwined legs, she tries to catch her breath, “sounds like your…” his fingers push past the weak resistance of the cotton, “ah, name.” His thumb and forefinger grip her chin tilting her head back towards him and she feels him shake his head softly.

“Tasha,” he says with a tone of warning. He slides his fingers between her folds his middle finger pressing harder than the rest. Her hips cant upwards to meet his stroke. She twist her fingers into the short hair at his crown. She is not gentle.

“Clint.”

His hand leaves her face but she leaves her head tilted back against him. Clint slips his boxers while she is distracted. She bites down on her lip to stop the moan that sits on the back of her tongue and tastes the metallic taint of blood. He doesn’t wait, he is not patient or gentle, he does not care to see her eyes. He pushes aside scraps of fabric. He thrusts up into her and the hollow ache behind her navel is filled with the not quite stretch and the not quite burn of him. The moan rolls forward on her tongue, it is salty and damp.

She closes her eyes as his hand grasps her breast, kneading her flesh, her nipple grazed by the roughness of his skin. Damp cotton caught between her cheeks, pushed aside to make way for him rides up and down with each of his thrusts. His other hand remains between her legs, fingers fanned out across sensitive lips, pressing down on her clit as she moves with him. It feels quick and dirty, it feels hard and unadorned and when he moans her name in drawn out syllables she feels more herself than she has ever felt before.

“Fuck Tasha, fuck… you are a fire fight and… a fucking symphony… fuck…” each word punctuated by an upward thrust, the poetry of sex.

“Shut up Barton,” she cries out as she rides a crescent wave of muscles clenching and needs demanding. She claws at his hand over her breast and contracts around his cock as the crescendo of orgasm hits. She stiffens, head thrown back against his shoulder, eyes open and blinded by the brightness of the room.

His arms are still wrapped around her, sweat clinging to each dip and rise of his muscles. He glides wetly in and out of her as she releases his head from her arm. Knots in her belly loosen even as she becomes aware of a slow building ache in her hip. Clint presses a breathless, open mouth kiss to her shoulder before his rhythm changes. He grunts spilling into her. His arms are a cage holding her tightly against his hard chest.

When reality descends and his grip loosens she can push hair from her face and straighten legs threatening to cramp. She pulls back enough to look at him again, the tan lines on his shoulders, his upper chest rising and falling erratically, the hollow pit of his belly, and his softening cock. She
recognizes each groove and curve, each scar and line. He is beautiful. With his dark lashes resting on his cheeks in an odd contrast to his large nose and sweat stained hair, he seems unfazed by her examination. Slowly his lips curve at the edges, Вы думаете, что я красивая? A memory, words for a different fight.

She dips her head licking the salt gathered at the corner of his mouth. His eyebrows rise with an unasked question before turning his head to return the kiss. His large hands cup her face.

“Tasha? Fuck is that blood?” he says opening his eyes, his tongue swiping across his bottom lip.

“I bit my lip,” she says as his thumb comes up to press against the torn flesh, it stings for a moment but he is surprisingly gentle.

“Whatcha do that for?” She shrugs. “Did I? I didn’t hurt you did I?” He stares into her eyes as if he could see a lie if she decided to tell it.

“You think I would let you hurt me?” She pushes his hands away from her face.

“No. I don’t know.” He sits up, putting a fist to his mouth, “I didn’t think you’d let me do that to be honest.” She watches his shoulder blades move beneath the surface of his skin as he hunches forward.

“Clint.”

“What?” he asks turning back to her, Natasha has pulled her legs into her wrapping her hands around her knees, thinly disguising the evidence of their debauchery. Even if this were the kind of room that she would be happy to see how many ways she can make him come apart beneath her in, she knows too much of Clint Barton to think he will listen to her words when every physical reminder of their wrestling remains.

“You name in my mouth, what does it sound like to you?” He gives her a slight smile.

“My name.”

“Clint,” she says firmly. He groans.

“It sounds like trust, Tasha, like trust.”

“As it should.” She raises her chin letting her curls fall away from her face before leaving the bed.
When she exits the bathroom he passes her like it’s any other day, like this is a safe house and they are on a mission. He doesn’t reach for her or smile. He maneuvers around her like a bomb disposal RCV, automatically and unaware. There is an unfamiliar tightness in her shoulders that should not be there after minutes spent staring blankly at the chipped tiles while hard water rained down her face.

The door shuts quietly behind her and the shower turns on. She combs out her hair and she hears him swear as the hot water gives out. A faded Midwestern twang to the indignant curses brings a small smile to her lips and it is minutes before she realizes that the tension has left her shoulders. He stays in the shower for his full three minutes regardless of water temperature.

The door opens, steam billowing out around him. Clint is holding a towel around his waist, fingers gripping at the point where the edges do not meet. His other hand rubs from the back of his neck to his forehead throwing small droplets of water off his damp hair.

“You need to learn to share, woman,” he says not looking at her.

She doesn’t answer. She zips her boots and pulls her jeans back down over them. She watches silently as he rubs his hair again with the towel. There is a rivulet of water that runs down his back following the indent of his spine and separating as it reaches the top of his ass trying to reach his Venusian dimples. The abrasions on his shoulders are healing and here and there bruises are turning yellow. He still favors his knee but he stands for longer and longer without searching the room for a place to sit or a wall to lean against.

He dresses in silence, a grey long sleeved t-shirt and jeans crumpled from the floor. His belt buckle is black but has glints of silver peeking through where he has rested it against the backs of chairs or the clasp of the worn leather cuff he wears on his left wrist in place of a shooting glove has rubbed away at it. He turns and stretches as she does up her duffel bag and his shirt rises up revealing a small trail of hair.

“Where next?” she asks. He lets his arms fall to his side again.

“Dunno, haven’t looked at our options. You pick.”

“Anywhere?”

“Anywhere but..”

“But southwest,” she finishes for him.

“Yeah,” he says one side of his mouth drawing upwards in an apologetic wince. There is part of her that wants to push him, to make him face his fears, force him to be the strong, willful Clint Barton he has always been once again. There is part of her that screams internally that his ledger will never be as red as hers and that he has no right to parade around cloaked in pain. That part has the cold, angry voice of Natalia, she speaks as if she has been shot, she speaks as if there is an arrow through her shoulder pinning her to a wall. Natasha thought she was dead.

“Tash? You okay?” he says coming closer his hands sliding up her arms, “You went blank for a second.”

“Just…” she tries to answer, pressing her lips together to silence Natalia in her head, “considering our options.” There is another part of her that looks up at him and sees the concern written into every
line of his face. There is another part of her that wants to kiss his mouth until the only thing he remembers is the taste of her, not Loki, not nightmares, not the feeling of knives and the way they slide so easily into skin.

“Screw options. Where do you want to be, Tasha?” he pats her left arm in a familiar rhythm.

“Want?”

“Yeah.” He turns and collects his wallet and cell from the table.

“I... home,” she says before she can stop the word.

“The Hellicarrier?” he asks repacking his remaining clothing.

“Clint that isn’t a home.” Even as she says it she knows she is the last person to define the concept of home. There is a tired, craving inside her that demands a safe place to go and she knows that isn’t the Hellicarrier and she knows that isn’t and has never been Russia. She has lived so long without such a place she can’t find a reason why now there would be an ache as persistent as a homing beckon flashing on and off inside her.

“Kinda felt like one to me.” He shrugs and gives her a halfhearted smile.

“Bare metal quarters, eating in shifts and never being at the same coordinates that you fell asleep in?”

“Grew up in a circus, plus,” he gestures making some wild encompassing movement whose meaning she can only guess at. “Aw hell.”

“Plus?” she says pointedly a small smile tugging at her lips with his ‘aw hell’.

“You were there,” he says avoiding her gaze.

“I was there?” she repeats blankly.

“I don’t know what home is to you, Tasha, but to me it… it started being you.” He scratches at his chin.

“Me?” She lets the frustration and confusion show on her face. Clint is one of the few people she will let see her this way and while she could smile and pretend she understood him, soothe his mild panic, play at being perfect like Natalie or Simone or any number of roles she’s taken on for men with egos as fragile as their grips on reality, this is not them. Clint and Natasha piece together truth from broken memories and fragile first principles.

“My best friend… and my bow, but if I have to I can get another bow… there isn’t another Natasha Romanoff and home, well, it’s you and the way you don’t kill me when I steal your fries and the foam rubber that sticks to my suit when you pin me to those crappy mats in the training room.” Clint Barton looks like the words he is saying are actively causing him pain. No, not pain, she realizes, embarrassment.

“You sound like you’ve thought about this,” she says crossing her arms but in an instant she is picking grey foam from his shoulders in her mind and swatting his hand away from the french fries that she knows she only puts on her plate so he can steal them. She can hear the sound his footsteps and his alone make on the metal corridor outside her quarters, the rhythm unique to his cocky gait.

“I think about shit, Romanoff.”
“You want to go back to the Helicarrier?”

“No, I want to go where ever you want to go,” he huffs, “So, where’s home Tasha?” he tilts his head to the side as he asks looking, for a moment, like a curious Labrador.

“I do not know.”

“But you said?”

“Yes. I did not think before I spoke.” She closes her eyes trying to solidify the faint wisps of reason that refuse to stay still.

“Tash, hey Tasha, it’s all good we got time. You can figure it out,” he says reaching out to gently drag his thumbs across the creases of her brow. He cups her face in his hands and smiles again when she opens her eyes.

“New York,” she says and he drops his hands from her face.

“It’s a mess back there… we might be recognized,” he says like a risk assessment is so ingrained in him he can’t help but run down their numbers. As he speaks a small amount of shame registers on his face, but it isn’t for the role he played in the mess that is New York she has seen that guilt and it shuts him down and makes him as intense as he is on an op, it is a guilt that makes him intent on being better. This shame mobilizes his face making him look boyish as if he has been caught with the cookie jar, it is as if he is sorry for scorning her plans.

“You still have your place in Brooklyn?”

“It’s a place to leave my comics and my couch, yeah?” He smells like toothpaste and soap.

“There then. We go there.”

“It’s not the Ritz.” Natasha raise her eyebrows until he looks at their surroundings. “Yeah, yeah I got it. You sure? It’s not your home.” He says resting a hand on his belt buckle and he watches her intently.

“You’ll be there?”

“It’s my place,” he replies easily, smirking like she thinks she can kick him out.

“Then…”

“Oh. Oh?” And on the North Sea of Clint Barton’s eyes it is like the sun comes out.
Natasha runs like there is no one chasing her. It is not how she prefers to run but the public gym of a large hotel is not the place to give anyone reason to believe that she is anything other than PR rep on vacation with her entertainment lawyer boyfriend. PR reps run like headless chickens when being chased, not like assassins with expert level training and so Natasha runs like she likes to keep fit and she tells her friends that one day she is going to enter the Boston Marathon, one day.

They are not vacation people. She wants to spar, she wants to throw herself round parallel bars and practice flawless gymnastics over mats that leave grey foam on Clint’s shoulders. She does not want to be pretending she has no real upper body strength or that she thinks Cameron might propose this trip. She runs and is acutely aware that she needs to train almost as badly as she wants to give herself over to the muscle memory of it. She’s going to lose form pretending to be other people and spending too long in the unmarked car that Clint covers in food wrappers and discarded items of clothing.

Clint isn’t training either, there are no archery ranges he can really let loose in between here and New York and though he is allowed to go a little harder in the gym because people’s expectations are in his favor he needs to be sparring, he need to get back to the intricacies of what it is they really do.

She becomes aware that she’s been running too long for Naomi the PR rep and she hits the cool down button on the treadmill. They could have made it back to New York by now, a few all night drives and they’d be in a place with the kind of equipment and personnel that gave her shape and purpose. Clint keeps stopping though pulling into hotels with concierges and gyms and turn down service. He hands people he usually has no use for black Amex cards with other people’s names and pulls her into him as he collects embossed envelopes with plastic card keys inside.

She has let him. She has let him leave his collapsible bow in the Kevlar bag. She has let him pretend a good night sleep is more important than the quick return. She has let him wake from nightmares and lie about their import. She has let him pretend Phil Coulson is not in a SHIELD hospital room. She has let him pretend they vacation. And in truth she does not know why.

The treadmill slows to a stop and she wipes it down with paper towel and sanitizer while she swigs from her water bottle. She can feel the runner on the treadmill behind her scan her form every time she looks away but he isn’t a threat just a man idly imagining a life in which he had a woman like her, as though he has any idea what a woman like her would entail. She needs to stretch but she has no desire to provide this man with fodder for his ludicrous daydreams. She can stretch back in their room. Clint or rather Cameron paid for a large enough suite that she could run a yoga class out of it should she wish.

Clint is not in the room when she gets back. She strips off as she walks to the shower, her sports bra loosening her hair as she pulls it over her head. The shower is, for all its expense, impossible to make anything less than scolding or Napoléon’s downfall so she sticks to brevity and efficiency. She dries herself and then stretches hamstrings, tapping her ankles to the black marble vanity as though it were a barre. She slips a loose dress over her body ignoring the way her damp hair trails water droplets over her shoulders.

It’s the slide of glass over tiles that lets her know Clint is on the balcony. Bare feet over plush carpeting should hide her approach but Clint is not a normal man and she expects him to look up from where he is seated with legs hanging off the side of their top floor balcony. She gets too close for her liking before he speaks, “Tasha? There’s vodka, the good kind.” He slides a bottle back towards her, it’s Polish not Russian but good quality and unflavored.
“Day drinking?” she asks evenly.

“Time is relative.” Clint wraps his forearms around the ornate railings of the balcony and pulls himself towards them. Natasha watches him the distinct impression that he would like this to be the edge of the world rather than the edge of their room forming in her mind.

“Thank you Einstein. Social convention however...” she says pursing her lips.

“Ha,” he gives a derisive snort of laughter, “social convention ain’t for the likes of you and me Red.”

“Speak for yourself, everything I do is about social convention.”

“Using it, fucking with it, you mean.”

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps,” he echoes flatly.

“You were gone when I came back,” she says after too long a silence.

“I’m not paying for those little jacked up bottles of booze in the mini bar.” Clint gestures back over his shoulder into the expensive hotel room. He does not take his focus off the sky line.

“You’re paying for the room.”

“Cameron Lucas is paying for the room.”

“I may just hang around accounting the day you try to convince SHIELD this an operational expense.” She smiles a little at the thought of him, feet up on the poor accountant’s desk in unlaced combat boots with a boyish smirk on his lips, spinning his very own brand of bullshit and folding paper airplanes out of the post it notes he’s stolen from a co-workers desk. She shakes herself at the unwelcome knowledge that the Clint sitting on this balcony is not the man who would fold airplanes and argue that mouse ears are an entirely necessary combat tool.

“Call it Workers Compensation.” He takes the last mouthful of something brown from a glass tumbler beside him.

“Ah,” she says softly.

The vodka hasn’t been opened, he has bought it for her. The cap comes apart in her hand as she slides herself down beside him. There is no glass for her so she takes a shot from the smoky glass neck of the bottle. “This is the new plan then,” she says as the burn fades in her throat, “drinking.”

“Why the fuck not.” She doesn’t answer him. Clint is not asking for an answer. He inhales harshly, “What else is there.”

“Going back to New York,” she says tucking the sundress between her thighs and taking another swig of vodka.

He glances at her quickly before grabbing a familiar square glass bottle from his side and gulping from it. When he speaks again it is harsh like the alcohol and the hopelessness have torn at his throat in equal measure. “Go without me Natasha.”

“No.”

“Hell I’d even give you the keys if I didn’t know you could break in and still do less damage than I
do with the keys.”

“No.”

“I’m not ready to go back there. I thought,” he shakes his head and takes another long gulp from the bottle, “I can’t go back.”

“How drunk are you?” she asks taking a long look at him as he hunches into the bottle and the drop below.

“Not drunk enough.”

“Take another shot.”

“What?”

“You’re not drunk enough, take another shot Clint.” He stares at her now really focusing on her for the first time since the conversation started. She stares back and then as if he were hypnotized he puts the bottle to his lips. He takes a mouthful and when she raises an eyebrow he takes another. He puts the bottle back between them.

“Tasha,” he begins, but she cuts him off with a look and picks up her own bottle. The bottle isn’t cold but she takes another mouthful before she speaks.

“I will get drunk with you Clint Barton. Tomorrow we are returning to New York City.”

“I’m not going Tasha.”

“Yes you are. We will drink and you will tell me about the nightmares, you will tell me why your bow is still in its bag and you will tell me why you cannot speak of Phil Coulson,” the alcohol must be kicking in just enough and his mouth goes slack at the force of her demands. “Take another shot,” Natasha insists pushing his bottle into his hand.
In every way he knows you fear

Three shots later she begins to speak. Clint has taken to leaning his head against the railing, looking down rather than at the sky line like the bird of prey he was named for.

“I assumed you would tell me when you were ready.”

“Nothin’ to tell. Just a wall of can’t.” His knuckles go white around the metal above his head as he speaks.

“чо ты пиздишь?” she sneers, wrapping her hands around the vodka bottle again. Clint pulls back from the drop, shock shifting his features from the mask of hopelessness.

“Jesus! Your mouth when you drink, classy as all fuck.” Natasha merely shrugs.

“You’re drunk enough, I think. I am drunk enough. We will play a game now. A truth for a truth.” Her sentences have taken on the cadence of her Russian and she fuzzily wonders why this only happens when she drinks with Clint. She turns to look at him seeing the barely there nod he gives in agreement. His posture tightens as she speaks, minutely but enough to trace the fight or flight response as it courses through his trained body, “I am compromised.”

“Join the club. I’m thinking I’ll have t-shirts made.” The smirk he gives at this has none of the brash humor of Hawkeye leaving only a bitter twist to his mouth.

“You have never told me when things are… ето просто пиздетс,” she reverts to Russian again unable to think of a word to describe the wrack and ruin of Clint Barton, he winces and she feels her own small internal flinch against the language of men who so recently thought tying her to a chair and monologuing about their plans was brilliance.”… all fucked up, why did I think you would now?”

“That your new favorite word Tash? Some Polish Vodka and everything’s pizdah all of a sudden? I’m SORRY, okay? Everything is just… shit-tastic right now. I thought I could handle it. I’m tryin’ to handle it.”

“It is not an accusation!” She is better than this. She has the skills to manipulate the truth out of most people without the need to resort to torture, she is elegant when others are brutal and yet a decision never to use those skills on her partner has left her speaking in broken sentences and wandering down half understood cul-de-sacs of ambiguity.

“Things don’t change,” she continues, her trigger finger retracting against her open palm, “You said things don’t change and yet I think I expected them to.” Natasha shakes her head taking a soft breath, “I am trying to say I am sorry, if… before… I would have pushed you before you climbed out on the closest place to the sky and tried to white it out with alcohol.” She would have pushed as hard as she pushed the moment she met him, tearing strips of flesh and truth from him and finding the boundaries of herself. The voice that told her to do those things she had silenced fearing it was Наталия telling her любовь для детей and to cut and run. She pushes the bottle to her lips and looks away as she gulps at it.

“Natasha,” he says sounding like he wants to say something, anything, but has no words other than her name.

“I apologize Clint Barton. This is not my best work.” It is flatter than she meant the apology to sound but she is tired and frustrated with herself and certain she has given up more truth than he has in their
game of truth for truth.

“I am not work! I’m your fucking… aw fucked if I know but I am not a mark or an op… or hell maybe I am. The easiest mark in the fuckin’ world.” He throws his arms up in the air but he is not yelling he is seething, his voice all the more violent for its lack of violence.

“My partner. You are my partner in every sense of the word.”

“Right. So what’s that mean Natasha? You gonna call up Fury and tell him he’s an agent down and you’ll be taking solos from now on?”

“Боже мой! You are always this defensive, I had forgotten.” And he is, when injuries put him out of action for weeks on end and she has had to remove all his bows from his quarters and his apartment, when mistakes were made and innocents are hurt, he buries himself in sarcasm and full scale attacks.

“Says you.”

“Says you? Are you twelve?”

“Fuck off. I’m drunk. You got me drunk, remember.” He takes another swig from his bottle watching her with a spiteful glare as he gulps down the brown liquid.

“You were getting drunk on your own I only facilitated.” She stands smoothing her dress over her legs. He moves, his left hand reaching for her as if he means to restrain her.

“Don’t go,” he stutters out. He puts his hand back in his lap forcibly. It is all the worse for the nakedness of the request.

“I’m not leaving. I am getting a glass,” she says softly moving back inside between the glass doors allowing herself the moment of sadness before she finds a water glass on the bedside table. When she returns he has pushed himself back from the edge and hugging a tumbler of whiskey between his knees. He rolls his head back against the stone wall. The sunlight striking his head lightens his hair until you can imagine he was once a tow-haired child with no knowledge of death, torture or the many ways in which a person could be broken. Once Clint Barton must have been a child to whom magic was a beautiful possibility and aliens could be fought off with a trusty orange toy gun. When he rolls his head to the side and opens one eye to look at her he ages in an instant. She remembers that the tow-haired Clint Barton wasn’t allowed to believe in beautiful magic and the power of toys for much longer than she was allowed to believe in love or safety or a world without blood.

“How do you do it Tasha?” he says when he fixes her in his sights.

“Do what?”

“This,” he gestures with his whiskey, “this not you in the driver’s seat aftermath?”

“It’s a decision,” she says very aware that it is the only way to explain her continued existence and yet it does not even touch the edges of the truth of it. She looks down at the water stained glass in her hand, her finger nail scratching at the rim.

“A decision?”

“To let go of the things that you aren’t responsible for and to make amends for everything else. The decision is simple, the consequence are not.”

She waits for him to make an acerbic comment about twelve step programs but it does not come
instead, quiet and small, he says, “I feel responsible for all of it.”

“Feel. Never make a decision based on feel,” she says letting a sad smile tug at her lips and finding a place next to him on the tiles.

“How fuckin’ romantic.”

“We are not the same ястреб. I know what it is to be unmade. You must tell me what it is for Clint Barton to be unmade.”

She lets him sit in silence for a time, his breathing shifting as a witness his thoughts. He rests his tumbler against his forehead as if the coolness of it will calm him. But the whiskey is not cold and the thoughts are not ones that can be calmed so easily. She pours the vodka into her glass and swirls the alcohol round and round while she waits.

“Every night I dream that I kill you,” he begins.

“Loki.” In every way he knows you fear.

“No. Tash,” he says firmly, “I dream that I kill you. Not that I’m gone and I kill you... I kill you.”
And when he screams

She stops breathing, for a second, maybe two. This is what he has been dreaming night after night as he lay beside her. ‘Then he’ll wake just long enough to see his good work, and when he screams…’ he’d said baring down on her with eyes too blue to be anything but mad and fists clenched. She hadn’t let him step in the way of her objective but somehow his voice had climbed inside her mind lying in wait.

“Clint.”

“Yeah. Every fuckin’ way. You die. I do it,” he punches out, she represses the shudder that threatens to expose her.

“You scream.”

“I?” his head whips towards her, his eyebrows raised and then they drop, “Yeah. I try not to but I guess…”

“But?”

“Jesus Tasha, it feels real. You think I wouldn’t scream if I lost you?” he growls, “Fuck! Tasha, that’s just loosing you… I don’t think I’d ever stop screaming if I was the sonofabitch that did it.” Clint gulps at his whiskey his gaze a thousand miles in the distance.

“Clint, don’t say that!” Natasha snaps. “If it had been me Loki had got to… I need to know you would have stopped me … you have my back, you know that means you have to stop me if I’m triggered.”

“Fucking Hell. This is fucked up on so many fuckin’ levels. Yeah, Natasha, if you’re gone, if there’s no way of gettin’ you back…. You want me to say it? I will end whatever is left of you. Jesus.” His hands retract into fists.

“Truth?” she narrows her eyes ignoring the cursing and the defensiveness and only looking for the bare, unvarnished truth.

“Truth.”

“Good.” She nods once.

“No, not good Natasha. Not good. Do you even know how sick it is that we have these conversations? Do you know how nuts it is that you are okay with me dreaming every night that I kill you?”

“I am not okay with that,” she says firmly.

“Yeah? You barely even blinked.” He is right of course, she refused to blink in part because she knows what it is to dream of a past you had no control over and the monster that is yourself and in part because she had suspected since the night he screamed and told her she was dead woman. If she’d hoped that it was only one of many different dreams it was only because she hoped in the face of hopeless not to be an aspect of his torture.

“Would blinking have been useful?” she says instead.
“It would have been human,” he sneers. Robot, she hears in his sneer, Romanoff the amoral, emotionless robot built to bring destruction on the enemies of the state. We gave you that word you know, she wants to say, Robot, you throw it at me like a grenade but it is a word of my people and it means worker. When I work there is no room for feelings. I am the best because I am a good worker.

“So is your anger with me and yet it achieves nothing,” she says biting back at him even as she knows he does not mean half of what he says and even less of the tone he says it in. Natasha takes a deep breath. She turns to look at him putting her remaining vodka aside. “It feels real. I know this. But you have not killed me Clint Barton, your brain no matter how slow it is will come to recognize this.”

“You know that? Is that what you know?” he says curling a little, his hand coming up to grasp at his hair, tugging roughly at it as if physical pain might distract from or cancel out the emotional pain. Natasha reaches out slowly loosening his grip before taking his hand from his head. She tilts his chin upwards.

“Truth,” she breathes.

“How do you know that?” he asks as if he is asking for permission rather than truth.

“I was not a ballerina. The memories feel real, the skills remain, but I was not a ballerina.” There are many things she could tell him now, families she thought she had, people she thought she was and always a trail of blood and betrayal but this is a question about Clint Barton and not truly about Natasha Romanoff so she chooses a memory of Tchaikovsky and ribbons binding her legs. Clint knows the patchwork that has been made of her life. He knows the girl shuddering with personalities crumbling inside her trying to hold together a world long enough to survive it who grasped his hand and trusted him. Today he does not need more than Tchaikovsky and ribbons.

“They sound like nicer memories.”

“Ha,” she lets out a surprised laugh, “You have never been a ballerina.”

“I Kill you,” he says bitterly.

“I danced pointe on broken toes.”

“Hold up!” he says suddenly, “My brain is not slow.”

“Really Barton?” she smiles, bare and vicious without pretense that she is anything but this.

“Drunk yeah, mind raped totally, but I am not fuckin’ slow!”

“And yet,” she says softly and gracefully swings her leg over him to sit straddling him. Despite the amount of alcohol in his system Clint is quick to grasp her hips steadying her and easing her into his lap. His fingers fan out across her hip and backside and in an instant his other hand rises to brush the strap from her shoulder.

“Aw hell, Nat. You’re naked under this?” he says brushing fingers across the swell of her breast.

“Yes.”

“I give up. I’m slow. Damn slow.” He groans as she rocks forward on his groin only his jeans between them, the seam of his fly pressing into her center.
“Not truth,” she answers and she licks her bottom lip.

“Not truth?” His eyes flicker between her mouth and her breasts.

“You are not slow. You do however talk too much.” She leans in grazing his lips with her own.

“Thought you wanted me to talk,” he says his eyes not leaving her lips and his hand firmly gripping her hip.

“And now I want you to stop,” she says and kisses him hard sucking his lip between her teeth. He tastes like oak and whiskey.

Between kisses into her open mouth he says regretfully, “There’s more truth, you know.” And she does know. There is more to tell and be told, thousands of walls to break down. Sometimes surgery must wait. Sometimes restructuring can be done in stages. Sometimes a little truth is enough.

“Yes and I will make you tell me all of it.” She reaches out and tugs him forward her fist clenched around his t-shirt. His head comes to rest against her forehead. He slides the other strap from her shoulder and drags his finger over her clavicle and down between her breasts. She grins with more teeth bared than she would allow anyone else to see.

“Make up your mind, Woman,” he says, whiskey bruised and gravel.

“Clint, I’m here, I’m alive, I’m real. Build that memory and for God’s sake stop talking.”

“Yes Ma’am”
Clint twists his hand into her hair pressing hard kisses to her lips. Her back arches as he sits up beneath her, her dress sliding further down her breasts. She pushes her index and middle finger barely under his jaw feeling his pulse race through his skin. When he bites softly into her bottom lip his eyes open and he watches her so intently she almost looks away.

Quickly, Clint’s hands leave her hair and loop around her thighs, his arms tense and he raises his eyebrows in a silent question. When he starts to lift her Natasha pushes down and says in a low and dangerous voice, “No.”

“No?” he asks suddenly still beneath her and around her.

“No. Here. Now.”

“Outside?”

“Here. Now,” she says leaning back only enough to find purchase on the fly of his jeans. She pushes his t-shirt up over his stomach feeling the heat of his skin against her palm. She feels his abdominal muscles contract when she tugs his jeans open. Clint makes a sound, a rumble from the bottom of his chest as he sinks his mouth into the vulnerable skin at the base of her neck, pushing her hair to the crown of her head. He moves across her shoulder and down one breast before she can free him entirely. He exposes a nipple to the air before latching on to it pressing it between his lips.

He is free and hard and weeping in her hand. She slides her thumb across the head of his cock and relishes for a second the satin taut over steel sensation of him against her skin. He says her name, his nose pressed against her exposed breast, his brow furrowed.

Long fingers stretch out over her thighs sliding the fabric of her dress up and finally gathering it around her waist. He lets time play out between them, her hair dishevelled, her breast naked and her bare cunt waiting in the sunlight on a tiled balcony. With her chin tucked she sees him lick his swollen bottom lip before yanking down the last of the material covering her. Clint grins without catching her eye, a feral, wild grin that send a wave through her contracting on emptiness. Natasha is breathing heavily when he finally moves. He lifts her a little with both his hands spread across her breasts and then he pulls her down on to his cock.

She offers a complete lack of resistance but she no longer cares that Clint Barton knows how very much she wanted him inside of her. Her knees hit the hard tile as he drags her forward. His head is on her shoulder as he thrusts up into her. His skin is flushed in a way it wouldn’t be were it not for the level of alcohol in his system. She claws into t-shirt covered shoulders, he is still mostly dressed in comparison to her nudity and she feels she has no time to examine the strange whirlwind of emotions it set to swirling inside of her.

He knocks over her glass when he moves his hand to her ass another indication that the whiskey has hit him hard. The tumbler bounces once against the ceramic tile and spills its contents. Before they are done he’ll be glazed in a thin layer of good Polish vodka. He turns his head as if he might try and retrieve the glass so she squeezes her internal muscles and hears him chuckle at his own distraction. He thrusts upwards again pressing desperate kisses to her neck, her chin, her mouth.

Natasha lets him do the work, the sun strikes her back and he is sweating beneath her and she is aware that she feels warm and safe regardless of the exposure. They pant, open mouths finding skin wherever possible to press against and muffle the sounds of them. He comes hard, fast and with an
utterly masculine grunt, his blunt fingers pulling at her ass cheeks. She hears herself sigh.

“You are fuckin’ filthy,” he mutters into her shoulder as his hands slide up her back. She moves to pull the straps of her dress back up her arms. Suddenly his hands stop her, “Nah, I’m not done with you yet.”

Natasha flicks her hair back from her face and raises an eyebrow.

“So you gonna let me carry you inside now or what?” he asks before rubbing a vodka coated finger across her bottom lip.

“I am capable of walking,” she answers a little irritably, pushing his hand away. The sex was good, the sex has always been good but the ego on this man seriously requires deflation. Clint only chuckles, blue eyes lit by exercise and whiskey.

“Yeah. I know but I kinda want to keep touching you, Tash,” he punctuates this by ducking his head and kissing her clavicle, “And I want you to be comfortable while I do absolutely filthy things to you now.”

“You planning on rocking my world, Barton?” she asks not allowing the smile to catch her lips.

“Hell yes,” he replies wrapping hard arms around her thighs and ass and pulling himself to his feet. She allows it this time curling her legs around his waist as his softening cock leaves her. She settles her hands in his hair giving it a tug as an unspoken challenge.

When the sun has set and Clint has come up for air Natasha reflects she could not say she was surprised that he even talks with his mouth full. She pulls two waters from the mini bar and tosses him one. He gives her a cocky smile as he cracks the seal. “No more vodka?”

“We are driving tomorrow, you need to sober up.”

“Says the Secret Agent who got me drunk.” Natasha collects his t-shirt from the floor and pulls it over her head.

“I achieved my objective.” Flipping her hair back over her shoulder she gives him no indication she is joking.

“Yeah? Which one was that? Makin’ me talk or having your way with me?”

“I don’t give up my secrets quite that easily, ястреб.” Clint starts to comb his hands through his hair before huffing and pouring a little of his bottled water into his hand to smooth the spiky mess back into some semblance of ‘we didn’t just have a whole lot of sex’ hair.

“Bet I could make you,” he smirks as he reaches across the bed to put down the water.

“тишина!” she answers knowing were it not for the endorphins blazing their way through her system he would not get such a fond response. “Shouldn’t you be saving all this chatter for Coulson? Hospital bed, captive audience, a little revenge?”

Clint stills in the bed making a face that usually accompanies a Midwestern drawl of ‘aw hell.’ Natasha narrows her eyes. “Tash... SHIELD isn’t gonna let us see Coulson.”

“Why ever not?”

“I’m not as good as you are but don’t think I haven’t learned something watching you down the end
of my scope. Hill was very cagey about the Coulson thing after you left.” He crosses his arms as he speaks tucking his hands into his armpits. Despite the bed, the sex hair and his state of undress the man in the bed is now Agent Barton.

“It was a debrief, Clint,” she says but there is a question in her voice. Clint Barton’s gut instincts are not to be disregarded. Clint Barton’s gut instincts have saved her life. She watches his face as he teases out the pattern he has been holding onto since their last debrief.

“Yeah but still. She doesn’t approve.”

“Doesn’t approve of what?”

“That’s the thing, she didn’t say. Fury’s up to something though. Something just as big as PEGASUS and just as outside our skill set. What I could make out from what she was letting slip…”

“Hill doesn’t let things slip,” she says shaking her head firmly.

“I know, right? She wanted to say something but wasn’t going to directly disobey the Director. What did you call it… Nothing we were ever trained for? Yeah I got the distinct impression it ain’t anything Hill was trained for either. This much I’m certain of, when they told you Coulson was dead, Tasha, Coulson was dead.” His eyes follow as she comes to sit beside him on the bed.

“Hawkeye? Hill said Coulson was alive.”

“Yeah. Now he’s alive,” he agrees, “Don’t get me wrong, SHIELD Medical is good but you’ve seen the footage right?”

“Yes,” she says, her memory flicking back to the footage at her debrief with Sitwell, the dual Lokis, the crack in the Hulk Cell made by Thor’s hammer, the anguished sound the Asgardian made as Coulson slid to the floor.

“You think Phil Coulson’s surviving that even with our medics?” Phil Coulson is just a man, an Agent and a good man but a man, not a god, not a science experiment, and she knows many ways in which to kill good men. Loki with a spear could kill a good man.

“No.”

“SHIELD isn’t gonna let us see him. SHIELD isn’t gonna tell Rogers, Stark and Banner he’s alive either.”

“We have level 7 clearance,” she answers looking up at him. We have rules, we have a code, they must tell us. Rogers, Banner, Stark they aren’t us, they aren’t SHIELD.

“Yeah and that’s why we know Coulson’s alive… and that’s all we are gonna to get. We go back to New York right now, check in at base… there isn’t gonna to be a bedside reunion, there’s going to be a story about rehab and a convenient mission that gets us to stop asking questions.” Clint would be angry, she decides, if he had leveled out, as it is he seems merely exhausted.

“You are certain?” she asks because she must.

“As certain as my gut can be right now.” Clint shrugs and then rubs his hand through his hair, his face desperate in his honesty. She can read the unsaid statement in his eyes, I’m not certain about anything right now. I’m not certain about me, how can I be certain about anything else. “You trust me?” he asks and holds out his hand.
“Yes,” she says and takes his hand.
It's a bank in Belfast, or it was a bank once, now it's a hotel because old fucking buildings always end up becoming fucking hotels at least that's what the years of running over roof tops the world over has taught him. It's stopped snowing but the powder's quickly icing beneath his feet and he just wants Romanoff to get here already so they can get to the evac point. He twangs the bow string strung across his chest. She’s got three minutes or he has to leave without her. The thought is sharp and nasty like a right cross with a diamond ring. He knows that he doesn’t want to leave without her not just because leaving a man behind is a fucked up life choice and that makes him antsy.

She gives him the shits with her endless questioning of his orders and taking risks she shouldn’t no matter how damn good she is, and she is good, Jesus Christ is she good. Mostly though it’s the fact that he’s here on babysitting duty, and he knows that Coulson and Fury are getting a good laugh out of the irony. She’s a hot red head with a body that just won’t quit but the attitude she cops, she’s far too much like he was when they threw him at Coulson for one last chance. She could have done this Op with any number of agents but Romanoff won’t work with anyone else, or rather works just well enough with anyone else and this is his punishment for disregarding orders. Babysitting, snarky redheads and Ops that are beneath his skill set.

He pulls his side arm from his thigh holster and turns towards the stairwell. She pushes the door open and narrows her eyes. "No arrow this time Barton? I feel so less special when you pull a gun on me." She takes a step out on to the ice that has formed, a slick puddle across the concrete, where the heavy fire door pushes the snow behind into mounds. It's disturbing how comfortable she looks in the black SHIELD cat suit, a little like seeing a lioness pretend to be a house cat.

"You got the drive?" he asks not lowering the pistol.

"Yes I got the drive and I lost my tail."

"Your tail? What tail? When I took off there was no fuckin’ tail Romanoff."

"Not to question your abilities Agent Barton, there was a tail when I left the building, there isn’t anymore."

"You trigger something? You let someone know you were there?" His aim follows her as she sways softly to one side, her hip kicking out to steady her stance.

"No. I do my job well. Unlike some Agents."

"Who are you working with, Romanoff?"

"Fuck you, Barton. I work for SHIELD," she looks insulted. Natasha Romanoff can look a million different ways and not one of them true he reminds himself.

"Where’s the drive?" he barks.

"I have it. I will give it to Coulson when we are extracted. Lower your weapon, Barton, we don’t have time for this."

"Give me the damn drive. You aren’t being extracted."
“You think you can take me?” she asks a cruel smirk on her lips but her last vowel is swallowed up by the crack of semi automatic gun fire.

Blood against snow. It isn’t the pool of blood growing larger beneath her fallen body that his eyes focus in on, it is the trail of blood leading from the roof access door. Dark red, almost black splashes frozen against the dirty snow on a roof in Belfast. She’d lost her tail but not without taking damage. Her eyes are open, her mouth agape, her skin quickly greying with the blood loss, her chest is a mess from the close range weapons fire but he finds it, the knife wound in her side, the long gash in her black SHIELD uniform.

This isn’t how it happened. He waited one extra minute on the roof in Belfast, the only concession he would allow himself to make. She pushed the heavy door open and smiled at his trained weapon pointing out that she much preferred when he pulled an arrow on her. He didn’t see the trail of blood on the snow. He was too close. He lowered his weapon and they made for the evac point. He didn’t even know there’d been a tail till she stumbled before the chopper. She had provided a run down while he pushed thick sterile gauze against the slash down her side, just deep enough to bleed like a motherfucker.

But in the slush of old snow and new blood she is dead, the girl with the attitude like Clint Barton and hair like the Red Square.

He opens his mouth and he screams.

“Clint!” the dead girl in the SHIELD uniform says.

He wakes, shaking the bed frame with the jolt.

“Not dead, Clint.”

“But you were,” he insists grabbing her too roughly. She is warm against his chest and her hair is pressed into his face.

“No I wasn’t,” she says her breath against his neck. “Clint, let me go.”

He doesn’t let go, his heart racing, he holds her tighter telling himself over and over she is real, she is alive and his brain will recognize it. She grips the hand he holds in her hair, twists once and then bends his wrist backwards pressing his thumb down towards his wrist. He releases her.

Natasha leaps from the bed. “Don’t you dare do that again. I say let me go, you let me go.” There is a crease between her eye brows and her eyes flash with a barely controlled panic he hates to see in her eyes.

“I… fuck, yeah of course. I, Jesus, I’m sorry, Tasha, fuck, I didn’t know I was doing it,” he rushes at once. Half asleep and disoriented with panic he feels his gut screaming ‘This is it. This is where she leaves.’

“That’s not…” she inhales sharply, “I can’t be here if you don’t know what you’re doing.”

“You said you knew I wouldn’t hurt you? You said, I wouldn’t be here if you hadn’t have said…” He wasn’t going to do this. She’d convinced him he was safe. If he closes his eyes again she’ll be there, still warm but ashen with the ruin created by his P30.

“That isn’t the problem, Clint.” Natasha is pacing in front of the bed.

“Did I hurt you? Fuck. Tasha did I hurt you?”
“No, you did not hurt me.” She turns to him, her lips pursed and her eyes annoyed, “But I will hurt you. If you don’t know what you’re doing I will hurt you. I can’t, I won’t stop myself.”

“I don’t want you to,” he rumbles.

“That’s half the problem. You’re so caught up in hating yourself right now you wouldn’t stop me. And if I feel unsafe I won’t stop.

“You shouldn’t have to stop.” The last thing he wants if for her to stop. She needs to fight back, she has to end him and this time if he pulls a knife he doesn’t want to be cognitively re-calibrated he just wants it to be over. He hates the way blood congeals around the cooling body in his dreams. He can’t bare that he never hesitates.

“Hawkeye!” she snaps, moving back towards the edge of the bed, “Stop looking for your fuck ups and listen to me. We have to go back to New York. You have to see Psych. You’re stuck in the trauma and I am not equipped to help you.”

“You know more about this shit than anyone, what makes you think SHIELD Psych is gonna…”

“I know some of it. Some of it. You and me, the Red Room and Loki, they’re not the same, similar shapes, similar edges, but it isn’t the same, Clint. I didn’t do it by myself. You know that. You were there.”

“Yeah I was fucking there, you gonna ditch me now I’m in it?”

“Fuck you, Barton,” she says like the firing of her glock and he winces at the echo from his dream. He barely hears what she says next, recoiling instead, as she adds in a voice soft and depleted. “It takes more than I’ve got right now to admit I don’t have all the answers, that I need help.”

“No! Fuck you, Natasha,” he yells, forgetting momentarily that he is not Clint Barton here. Here, he is an Entertainment Lawyer with a hot girlfriend and a black Amex. “Leave,” he mutters, a weird mix of anger and contrition lowering his voice. “Run like you want to. This is too fucked up for you? Well I’m God damned sorry.”

She pushes off from the bed, letting his bitter retort hang in the air with only her insulted huff for company. He grabs his boxers from the floor tugging them on furiously below the mess of sheets. She is suddenly beside him on the bed when he drops his legs over the side. She hands him bottled water, sitting still beside him, only the wildness of her curls and the spots of color on her cheeks telling of the fight they are having.

“Drink the water.”

“Fuck off!” he answers standing up, he wants to leave but hell if he knows where to go.

“You wake up from these dreams sweating as though you are going cold turkey, drink the water,” she says and raises her eyebrows in an unspoken ‘there is an easy way, Hawkeye, and there is a hard way.’

“No! Fuck you, Natasha,” he yells, forgetting momentarily that he is not Clint Barton here. Here, he is an Entertainment Lawyer with a hot girlfriend and a black Amex. “Leave,” he mutters, a weird mix of anger and contrition lowering his voice. “Run like you want to. This is too fucked up for you? Well I’m God damned sorry.”

She pushes off from the bed, letting his bitter retort hang in the air with only her insulted huff for company. He grabs his boxers from the floor tugging them on furiously below the mess of sheets. She is suddenly beside him on the bed when he drops his legs over the side. She hands him bottled water, sitting still beside him, only the wildness of her curls and the spots of color on her cheeks telling of the fight they are having.

“Drink the water.”

“Fuck off!” he answers standing up, he wants to leave but hell if he knows where to go.

“You wake up from these dreams sweating as though you are going cold turkey, drink the water,” she says and raises her eyebrows in an unspoken ‘there is an easy way, Hawkeye, and there is a hard way.’

“Why the fuck are you still here?” he sneers. He squeezes the water bottle in his hand refusing to drink it. She is right, he needs the water, he can feel a bead of sweat roll down the back of his neck, his hair is damp and he stills long enough that he feels the chill of it as he cools. He knows he’s being petulant but not drinking the water in his hand is the only control he feels he has.

Natasha rolls her eyes pulling her knee to her chest, one long pale leg still dangling from the overly large bed. “I’m not leaving, you utter moron. I will sit outside every psych appointment you have just
as I sit in your hospital room each time you jump through a window.”

He only stares.

“Как посеешь, так и пожнешь,” Natasha says tiredly.

Chapter End Notes

Как посеешь, так и пожнешь - gloss = As you sow so shall you reap.
A flash of steel and the pain of a good man

His lips actually move as he attempts to translate. She can see the ‘how’ then the frown as he repeats a hash of her Russian that comes out ‘pose esh?’ when he gets to ‘so’ she takes pity on him. He looks miserable, barely clothed, sweat reflecting the city lights that stream through the open curtains. It is probably sleep deprivation that makes her think it is sweet.

“As you sow, so shall you reap.”

“Fuckin’ Idioms,” he grunts scratching at his hard abdomen.

“Biblical, it is in the English version also.” She rests her chin on her knee, his face is in shadow but she can see the anger start to leave his body, shoulders falling as he breathes once again from his diaphragm.

“Why would a sniper need to know the Russian for sow? Or reap? Not even sure I know those words in English.”

“Because sometimes translating the curses alone isn’t enough?” she says ignoring the habitual way he runs down his intelligence, just a sniper, just a soldier, just a carnie.

“It gets me by,” he says with a shrug and then low as if he is trying to prevent her from hearing it he mutters, “cak pos eesh tacky poznewsh.” It’s a passable attempt but she won’t let him know she has heard him not when he is a bare wire and stepping to close to education is a sure way to cause a spark.

“There is more to languages than just getting by,” she replies watching him as he finally opens the water bottle in his hand. The snap of the lid seems to break him free of the conversational diversion she has drawn him into.

“What does this have to do with anything Natasha?” he says flatly before taking a swig.

“There is more to people than just getting by too, Clint. You made a different call, brought me in, that in and of itself would be debt enough but…”

“Enough with the debt shit already,” he says over her. “Seriously gonna punch a hole through a wall if I hear that word again tonight.” Muscles contract beneath his skin punctuating the frustration in his voice.

“But,” she specifies pointedly, letting her foot slip from the bed and leaning forwards as she speaks, “Your goofy face, terrible jokes and complete disregard for how dangerous I actually am… they are the first real memories I am absolutely certain of because you did not leave.”

“I left plenty.”

“I know the rhythm of your boots on the corridor outside my quarters because I learned it in those early months, ястреб. You said you left, you were told to leave, you did not leave.”

“Yeah, well… you were a kid and they’d messed you up… didn’t seem right,” he shrugs again in an almost helpless fashion his face coming out of the shadows.

He scratches at the back of his neck and she makes certain he can see her eyes when she repeats, “Как посеешь, так и пожнешь,”
“So what? This is repayment?”

“So Clint, you were a good man and they messed you up… it isn’t right to leave.” Their hands are soaked in red but of this she is certain Clint Barton is a good man.

“You don’t feel safe with me. I don’t feel like it’s safe for you to be near me. What if I’m not a good man?”

“I wasn’t a child.” She shrugs a little in return, depreciating the years stolen from her.

“We can’t keep having this same fucked up conversation.” For every inch he gives her there is a flash of steel in his eyes and the dogged push back.

“No we can’t,” she agrees.

“If we go back to New York…”

“When we go back to New York.”

He shakes his head but takes a step forward regardless, “How is this gonna work? I mean, aw Nat, even before Loki I never really let myself get to thinking about if we could make it work. Now… well… if it wasn’t sanctioned before it’s sure as hell…”

“We have rarely cared for orders.”

“So we just… pretend? Stop?” he stops himself and sighs exhaustedly. If she was manipulating him this would be the point she would offer him, the orphan who always watches other people leave, reassurance. He raises his head and asks, “What do you want here Tasha?”

Natasha licks her bottom lip before speaking, “Half of SHIELD thought we were fucking already, the other half only disregard that rumor because they assume I kill my mates after sex.” She smiles sharply.

“That’s not an answer,” he says and she drops the attempt at humor.

“No it isn’t.”

“What do you want?” In response she stands, crossing the small distance between them, ignoring the way he rocks back on his heels as if he is considering moving away from her again.

“Something solid, one unchanging thing in an ocean of uncertainty.”

“Yeah,” he grunts.

“Yes.”

“I’m just more ocean,” he frowns, hanging his head.

“No,” she says resolutely. She can see he is plainly discomforted by how close she is now. He rolls his head to the side looking down at her, small and clothed only in his t-shirt, tiny movements of facial muscles telling her more than he can articulate.

“Tasha.”

“No, you are not.” She slips two fingers into his hand clenched by his side. Natasha turns away gazing out the window at the starless night. “We go back. You’ll level out. You’ll separate Clint
from the sea.”

“And SHIELD?” He doesn’t let her fingers go but he doesn’t move any closer.

“I have not been The Black Widow for this long for nothing Clint Barton,” she turns back to look at him keeping her voice low and soft.

“That sounds like a threat.”

“A promise,” she takes a step closer lifting her chin to look up at him, “follow my lead?”

“Yeah, well, we both know I do that more often than not.” He looks down at her, his eyes flick back and forth as though he was searching her face for something. Natasha smiles again and takes her time reaching out to press her other hand into his sternum.

“I like this,” she says.

“Like what?” Clint looks down at the place where her palm and his chest meet.

“You and me and sex.” She wants him to smile, to grin his boyish grin and shake off the weight of monsters and magic and risk and lies.

“Is that what this is?”

“Everything else was here before. That is the new part.”

“And the screaming and the…”

“You say it as though I haven’t woken to screams before,” she raises an eyebrow, smiles a half smile.

“For fuck sake Tash!” He turns towards her pressing his hand over her own against his chest. If he had been any other man it would have worked, a pout, a seductive smile, a little innuendo and all the complications fly out the hotel window. “This is different. You, you are scared of me.” He pulls her hand away from his chest bringing her other hand up to meet it. She isn’t trapped. Though his hands are wrapped around her own, enough that she can feel the small tremor that should not be there, he holds her loosely in a position of entreating rather than of power.

“The same conversation,” she breathes.

“Yeah. You don’t answer any fuckin’ thing, we gonna have the same argument.

“You don’t believe me when I do answer.”

“Not when you try to break my arm to get away from me,” he growls, dropping her hands.

“You didn’t know what you were doing,” Natasha bites back. He didn’t let go, she told him to let go and he didn’t. He has always let go, stepped away, never crowded. For a small moment, held too tightly and against her will all she could hear was the thump of a fist against polypropylene.

“Then how the fuck can you say you trust me?”

“Do you know what you are doing now?” she replies angrily.

“Tasha!”
“It is not black and white.”

“It is for you. It’s always been for you.”

This is what she does, complications she breaks down until they are the simplest they can be. When things are grey or morally ambiguous, she is pragmatic and ruthless. It’s not that complicated, she’d told the God of Lies and she had not lied. She can see the complexity but she has always shied away from it preferring the blade to the suture, the sheer drop to the long climb back but love is not simple and love is not a cut or a fall.

“And love has always been for children,” she says hoping he will not push her more than she can take.

“What does that mean?”

“Perhaps black and white aren’t the only colors,” she allows.

“Natasha… I love you,” he says as if he is the only one who means it. “I won’t have you in danger because of me.”

She nods once and looks down at her hands suddenly feeling the absence of her uniform and her Widow’s bite, charged and weighty against her wrists. “We go back to New York. You will do everything you must to level out and I will be the one to worry about the danger.” Natasha looks up again making certain this time he will not argue with her. “And SHIELD? SHIELD wishes to hide Phil Coulson from us then it is only just that they do not get to know about my partnership.”
He couldn’t name even one of the songs that have played on that damn silver mp3 player since they’d left. Natasha isn’t one for small talk so other than the music he hasn’t paid attention to and the low hum of the engine. It’s still and quiet enough to build up a nice level of anxiety as they get closer and closer to their final destination. Driving is not enough of a physical endeavor to tamp down the pulse of dreadful energy spreading outward from his chest.

“Pull over,” Natasha says in a voice that sounds like a sigh.

“What? Why?” he asks automatically, he does not take his eyes from the road.

“You haven’t taken your hands off the wheel in fifty eight minutes.”

“Yeah, you know that’s expected when drivin’, Tash.”

“You know,” she says raising an eyebrow in his peripheral vision, “your hands never stay on the wheel. You seem to believe your knee is just as capable of steering.”

“So I’m bein’ conscientious for a change.”

“No. Pull over.”

“Jesus, Natasha, I’m driving okay. We’re going back. Just drop it.”

“Pull over.”

“Fuck. Fine.” Clint thumps the wheel once with the palm of his hand before pulling on to the shoulder.

“Out. I’ll drive us back.”

“Think I’m gonna chicken out?”

“I don’t think you need to expend the extra effort. Clint, it’s hard enough for you to go back to New York, why make it harder?”

“Driving ain’t hard,” he mutters before chewing on his bottom lip.

“And that’s why your knuckles have grown steadily whiter the further we get?”

He drops his head, tilting as he considers her statement. He takes his hands from the steering wheel. Clint feels the corner of his mouth tug upwards, a noticeably hysterical laugh bubbling up inside him. She’s got him. She’s always had him pegged, from the get go the only thing he’s ever managed to hide from her has been how unreservedly he loves her and he is beginning to realize that had more to do with Natasha’s willful blind eye than his skills at deception. He starts to nod, his whole body moving with the agreement.

“Yeah, yeah okay. You win,” he answers, surrendering without a hint of bitterness

“I win?” she asks incredulous.

“Yeah? You need some kinda trophy?” Clint looks down at his hands stretching out his stiff fingers as he does so.
“No. I thought it would be more difficult.”

“Yeah, well, some things aren’t worth the fight.”

“And,” she says pointedly as he shifts in the seat, “I am right.”

“Tasha, you’re always fucking right, just some things are worth the fight.” And then he starts to laugh, a chuckle that pulls at his belly and makes his shoulders shake. He can see her now, her expression at first surprised and then almost happy before shifting, as his laughter doesn’t stop, into concern. He reaches for her hoping that he’ll land on a touch that communicates what word won’t come. I’m okay, Natasha. Well, not okay, but not crazy. It’s just laughing. Just laughing. He grasps her knee, feels her instinctively tighten beneath his hand before she rests her own hand over his. It’s a simple swipe of her thumb over the length of his hand that starts to calm him.

When he stops, sucking in clean air, he opens the door, nods once and climbs out. Natasha rounds the car at the same time meeting him at the trunk.

“Hey,” she says sliding her hand to the middle of his chest, “Get some sleep. Stop acting weird. Save it for the Psychs.”

“That almost sounds like you care,” he says leaning back and away from the warmth of her hand.

“Almost.” She walks round him to the open driver’s side door. He shrugs, scratching at the palm of his hand before following her into the passenger seat.

When he hunches down into her newly vacated seat, she speaks “Stop that, Hawkeye.”

“Stop what?”

“That face.”

“My face?”

“The intense frowning.”

“Intense frowning?” he asks. In answer Natasha flips down the visor exposing him to his reflection as she pulls the car out from the shoulder. It’s a blunt, cruel honesty that he should expect from Natasha but hadn’t thought to, he looks once into the dull, blue grey of his own eyes, scans quickly the washed out appearance of his skin as if he hasn’t drunk enough water or seen enough sun and flips the visor back up wincing. “Whatever, wake me when we get close?”

“Perhaps.”

He snorts, slides the seat back and fold his hands across his chest. He decides to sleep, breathes as deeply as he can and tries to let the tension leave his body with the slow exhale.

It’s sticky even when you haven’t been running in and out of alley ways and touristy market stalls. When you have been doing that, it’s like going for a swim in other people’s sweat and he has had enough of it. It feels like it’s been nothing but running and dodging for days. If they keep up this trajectory west they’ll end up on Gezira Island and he could get up on Cairo tower and get his bearings, blend in with the tourists.

He can’t carry a bow here, so he has a side arm and a couple of knives but the lack of his weapon is making him edgy perhaps even more than the cat and mouse they’ve been playing for what is it three days now? This is why other teams have extraction plans.
Ahead of him he sees Natasha dart left, her red hair hidden beneath a dark scarf. He follows and when he catches up he finds her cornered by three armed men. Natasha drops swiping one man’s legs from under him. They are too close for her usual run up the side of the wall and over them maneuver and if she grabs one man twisting him over between her thighs the other is bound to grab her mid twist. There is gun fire as she takes out the first. As the man falls backwards, Natasha grins a feral grin and quickly catches his eye telling him that she knows he’s arrived. It’s a fraction of a second before she is attacking again, not enough that the men see her. None of them have noticed his entry.

Three quick shots, less than three seconds for him to aim and take all three out. He hesitates, she kicks, one guy’s head snaps as it connects with her boot.

This is not how it happened, he rounded the corner she dropped and took out one guy, he swung back, pistol in his left hand and took out the remaining two as she snapped the third’s neck where he lay disoriented on the ground. She’d looked up at him, fire colored hair peeking out from the scarf, and raised an eyebrow. “You turn when you shoot like a pistol is a bow. It’s unnecessary and inefficient.”

“Yeah, yeah,” he’d said offering his hand as she popped from the ground like gravity was for other people, “I don’t miss, so you can keep your opinions about style to yourself.” And he’d wiped the back of his hand across his forehead.

Now she’s fighting for her life. A blow to the side of her face takes her by surprise as she flips back onto her hands. He stands at the edge of the alley watching the horrific ballet unfold. He does not move. He does not aim. He does not fire. One man goes down with her knife in his throat, his compatriots don’t flinch. There is a flash of confusion on her face as the man with the green keffiyeh grabs her by the throat. She is pushed back against the wall. Natasha can’t breathe but she looks straight at him, sweat covered and stationary. He sees the exact moment she realizes that he will not help her. Her eyes go blank even before the man runs the Masiern fixed blade across her throat.

Clint turns and walks away, merging into the crowds on the streets. One one thousand, two one thousand, three one thousand. Clint opens his mouth and screams into the humid Nile delta air.

“Clint, Clint, Clint,” the girl with the opinions about his shooting style says, “It’s a dream, open your eyes,” she says again though she shouldn’t be able to speak with her trachea severed.

He opens his eyes and gasps.
Home is where the walls are crumbling and yet you do not mind

They walk the two blocks back to his apartment, Clint limps only enough that she notices. He shifts his bag on to his other shoulder as he looks up at the crisscross of fire escapes. It is no better than a safe house with mortar crumbling between bricks, and paint and plaster peeling from the hall walls but it is familiarly Clint and Clint is familiarly home so she chooses to ignore the smell of cured fish, urine and stale air that layers itself in the stairwells.

He slouches to one side as he searches his pocket tiredly for his keys. She watches from behind as he jiggles them in the deadbolt to get it to open. His living room is a grayish purple color and smells of old and airless tombs. His stuff is still in boxes leaning against the old sofa and the empty book case but there are four old beer bottles lying on the floor next to the kind of indent made into sofa cushions that speak of a man too tired and too untethered to make his way to the bedroom.

Clint drops his bags to the floor only keeping the black Kevlar pouch that contains his bow over his shoulder. Silently he makes his way to a closet and hangs the bow against a hook inside. There is a mishmash of coats and sporting equipment wedged in the small space but the quivers and bows are neat and separate. Only once the closet is closed again does he turn to her and offers a shrug.

“So this is my place, this is my shit… uh you sure you wanna stay here?”

Natasha nods and stacks her own bag against the wall near the door.

“There’s not much here and, Jesus, I haven’t changed the sheets in like…”

“Three years?” she asks.

“You wanted to come here. I was happy living off that SHIELD Amex,” he say defensively and Natasha barely stops the short burst of bitter laughter at the idea that either one of them has been happy traipsing across the continental USA.

“We order in. You change your sheets.”

“I’m not the one with a problem with the sheets,” he looks up and quickly frowns adding “Yeah, yeah, I’ll change ‘em.” Clint gazes at her, standing by the door, he takes a deep breath and then gestures with his thumb to the other room. “I’m gonna just, yeah, okay then.”

She can hear him muttering in the next room, the muffled slump of pillows falling onto hard wood floors. In the kitchen she looks into the fridge to find a jar of mustard, something that once may have been cheese but now was a penicillin culture and three long necked beers. She opens two against the corner of his kitchenette’s bench. If she had a refrigerator in a place that was hers and not a series of safe houses secreted across the globe and bases she has accepted as places she must be, then her fridge she supposes would be no different.

There is a clatter in his room and the sound of him swearing. When she gets to his room she finds him jumping up and down with a ball of sheets in his arms. Natasha taps the beer against the door jamb. He looks up, forehead wrinkling and freezes on the spot.

“What are you doing Barton?”

“Changing the fuckin’ sheets,” he grunts.

“And the jumping up and down was in aid of?”
“I walked into the little table thing. Why do I even have this thing?” Clint casts a glances at the offending bedside table. “Jesus Christ, I think I broke a toe.”

“Sit down,” she says walking towards him slowly.

“I’m changing the sheets,” he grunts out again without looking up.

“Sit down Clint. If I show up at base with an even more injured partner in tow SHIELD will accuse me of going rouge.” She cocks her hip out and waits on the stubborn man in front of her. Clint takes a deep breath and sits himself on the sweat stained mattress. She raises an eye brow and drops her small smile, “That was easier than I expected.”

“Yeah, well, they’d make me hunt you down…” Clint shifts into a passable Nick Fury impersonation as he speaks, tucking his chin and scowling, “Agent Barton the Black Widow is your problem…” another deep breath, “Plus it really stings.”

“You have been shot, you have been beaten and you have been stabbed and you let a stubbed toe take you down?” she says wryly as she moves towards the bed.

“I said it stings, you said SHIELD would accuse you of going rouge, who exactly is overreacting here?” Clint looks up pinning her with an incredulous look. She joins him on the bed and notices the way his muscles flex a little with his surprise that she chooses to sit so closely.

“It is not like you to be this clumsy.”

“Yeah,” he answers flatly and runs his palms down the length of his denim covered thighs.

“Beer?”

“I had beer?” he asks taking the bottle she proffers.

“Yes.”

“Chalk one up to forethought.” He smiles a little and clinks the neck of his beer against hers.

“Or passing out before you manage to drink them all,” she says as he takes a mouthful.

He swallows and then replies, “That too.”

She lets him sit silently, drinking his beer and staring at the discolored wall. Every so often he takes a deep breath as if he want to speak but then no conversation follows. The pattern of swallowing and deep breaths plays out for a time. She listens to the spaces in between, the shallow cervical breaths that meter out his other breaths and watches his hand wrapped around his beer. He has no intention of speaking but rather is trying to calm himself.

“How did I die this time?”

“Tasha,” he says his voice dropping as his eye line follows to the floor.

“You prefer that I spend my time imagining the things that make you scream?” she says pushing him regardless.

“Cairo, that side street?” He puts the beer down on his side table.

“You didn’t have your bow in Cairo, did you take me out with your gun or did you best me in hand to hand?” She can hear she sounds light and vaguely amused by the prospect but her stomach turns
at the thought and she sees his hands clench briefly before he stands abruptly and rounds on her.

“Tasha. This is sick.”

“No Clint, sick is the many things I have done that were not in dreams.”

“I walked away, you were outnumbered and you thought I had your back, I walked away and let you die.” He pushes himself back against the wall, sliding down against it as he speaks. She lets him bury his face in his hands fighting against the urge to go to him and pull his hands away, wrap them around her own face and beg him silently to forget.

“Perhaps that is progress,” she sounds indifferent though she feels a touch of hope.

“Progress?” he asks his eyes flash as he drops his hands, “You and I remember Cairo very differently.”

“What do you mean?”

“Cairo. Tasha, it was the first time you trusted me enough to… you let your guard down… you didn’t try to run the op on your own.”

“I never…”

“Nat. Come on,” he says and there is enough of the old Hawkeye charm in his tone that she yields.

“Fine.”

“You realized I wasn’t going to take out the henchmen and your eyes, they went dead,” he shakes his head, once and hard, “and I stood and watched until you were actually dead. Why would I do that Natasha?”

“You did not do that. I remember Cairo. You did not miss. You never miss.” I remember everything, with perfect clarity, I remember everything since you made a different call. I remember Cairo and you had my back. I remember because you had my back.

“I didn’t even take the shot.”

“You took the shot Clint,” she shakes her own head definitively. He stares at her for a minute and she can see the ambivalence in his blue eyes, caught between an argument he doesn’t want to make and a truth in her words he can’t bring himself to believe. He tips his head forward. His feet flat on the floor in the purple converse sneakers that he has always been strangely fond of, the alleged broken toe forgotten in the rehash of his nightmares. For a moment he hugs his knees into his chest, wrapping his long fingers around his knees in a childlike attempt to soothe himself. As soon as he does it he seems to catch himself and looks up again with a flicker of annoyance fading from his features.

“I’m so tired,” he says.

“I know.”

“No I’m sayin’… I’ve never felt this tired, like sleeping isn’t making me less tired, like I’ve been awake since the south west. I feel cold. All the time. I’m walking into shit. I can walk a high wire Tasha and I’m walking into shit. This is either sleep dep or Loki and I don’t know which one it is.”

“Do you want to go in tonight?” she asks. She is aware she couldn’t make that call either.
“Hell no!” he says reflexively.

“Should I make you?” she asks quietly in return.

“Truth?”

“Truth.”

He takes another deep breath, “I don’t know.”
She encourages him, forcefully, into the shower to wash off the fever sweat of nightmares. She leaves his sheets half changed as she strips and redresses in shorts and a tank top. He passes the three minute mark and the shower continues. At four minutes she slides between the bathroom door and door frame to find him balanced against the shower tiles by forehead and palms.

“Hawkeye,” she says softly but he starts regardless, every muscle group clenching in quick succession. He turns his head and fixes upon her through the steam.

“Hey Tasha.”

“Are you coming out?”

“Maybe later,” he says resting his head back against the tiles again and closing his eyes.

Natasha pulls her top over her head before sliding her shorts down her legs. She slips into the shower behind him. When she glides her hands up his back he clenches like he didn’t realize she was there and she winces. His skin is clammy despite the hot water running down his body.

“What are you thinking?” he asks.

“That I am, ultimately, a very selfish creature.”

“Why?” he asks turning to face her, water rolling down his face like rain drops.

“I suspect the right thing to do is to take you in… tonight… no waiting.”

“Tasha, I don’t want…”

“I know,” she cuts him short, “I will not make you. If you wanted to return tonight I might even stop you.”

“Why?” he asks without the note of desperation that had colored his voice only seconds before.

“I want tonight.”

“You want tonight?”

“One more night before everything changes. Here with you, in this disgusting apartment.”

“Hey now, it might be a bit beat up,” she raises an eyebrow that he only disregards, “but it’s mine and you gotta make your own stuff work out.” His eyes closes tiredly as he finishes this raison d’être. She looks up at him warm water splattering against her face and wonders if Clint and this partnership and every mark in her ledger is her stuff, the stuff she is meant to make work out.

“Yes, I can see that,” she says softly and she is not sure he even hears her.

“It doesn’t change,” he mutters, pulling her against him blindly.

“We both know it will,” she answers before pulling back. “I want one more night and I will not give it up even though it might hurt you more if I do not.” At this he opens his eyes again. She can see the sudden flash of need in the blue.
“I’m okay, Tasha. Really. I’ll get a grip on it.”

Her chest grows tight. She swallows trying to reset her breathing. “This is what compromised is, Clint.” Her finger taps at his clavicle. She wants to look away from those eyes, equal parts orphaned boy and hardened soldier. His brow furrows and then abruptly his expression changes, a smirk, a cocky tilt as his hands slide down to her hips.

“Are you crying? Aw, Tash, no.”

She is not crying. Yet she knows this game and it is the one Clint plays when he realizes that reality has got the better of both of them. It’s a hidden hand to pull them back from the edge. Anyone else would see Clint Barton, the fool, amusing himself yet again. She knows better. Coulson perhaps knows better but he would never say. Clint Barton always provides her with an exit strategy even if it means throwing himself in front of the bullet.

“I’m standing in a shower, Barton. I do not cry,” she huffs.

“Okay, okay,” he muses as if he does not believe her and the weight dissipates.

“Are you coming out now?” she asks, letting him poke and prod to trigger anger, spite and stubbornness. He nods once and then cups her cheeks. He looks as if he will dip his head and kiss her.

“You don’t want to hang out in here for a bit?” he asks instead his voice low and concerned, “‘til you don’t need the water on your face?”

“I am not crying,” she insists feeling less playful by the second. Natasha brings her arms between his and in a quick movement brings them up and over his own pulling his hands away from her face.

“Yeah, I got that,” Clint chuckles dryly as she stomps out of the shower.

“Fine. I’m going to order food,” she says staring at the towel rail inhabited by two threadbare towels of an indeterminate pink grey telling of a man who does not separate his whites from his colors.

“Get something with onions it’ll give you an excuse.”

“Change your sheets, Barton,” she orders collecting her clothes from the floor. Clint only chuckles again.

“I guess athletic shower sex is outta the question now?” he calls as she makes her way out of the steamy room.

“Like you could handle athletic shower sex,” she answers matter-of-factly and shuts the door behind herself.

“I could give it one hell of a shot,” she hears him crow from behind the thin wood. She shakes out her damp hair, pulling back on her discarded clothes she glances at the bedroom window. It’s as beaten, chipped and repainted as the rest of the apartment but she can see that it has been pried open at its base to allow access to the fire escapes that frame the apartment block. She wrenches it open permitting the cooling air access to his hotbox of a bedroom.

“Greatest Marksman in the world?” she calls out as the shower continues.

“You called?”
“Get out of the shower and change your sheets.” She waits a beat and the water cuts out and the pipes groan in aqua interruptus.

His phone is ancient and hangs on the wall. She undoes the kinks in the cord as she orders a mountain of food that normal people would assume she wouldn’t eat. When Clint finally exits the bedroom he is wearing pajama pants with the pattern of targets. She smiles and lifts herself onto the counter. He sighs and returns her smile before throwing himself on to the couch. Her tablet initializes next to her and she wipes through the various news outlets takes on what they are calling ‘The Battle of New York’. Occasionally she reads aloud the passages she knows he’ll find funny, the editorial calling for Tony Stark to rebuild the whole of midtown because heroes cause villains, the questions about the identity of the man pretending to be World War II hero Captain Steve Rogers and the smaller references to a man seen fighting off aliens with a bow and arrow.

The food arrives in bags and boxes. Natasha lets out a small moan as she bites into a neatly folded slice of pizza and leans back onto the couch. Clint shakes his head and laughs through a mouthful of noodles. He slides himself down next to her and bumps his shoulder against hers.

“I love you Natasha Romanoff.”

“This, you have already said,” she says as she rifles through the bags of food.

“Some things you just keep sayin’, some things I reckon need to be said a lot and as loud as you can.” His chops sticks click together as he speaks and Natasha narrows her eyes.

“Do not go yelling these things from your rooftops, Hawkeye;” she slides her hand on to his chest before grabbing at the neck of his t-shirt and smiles viciously.

“I’m not stupid, Nat,” he says untangling her hand from his top. “We ain’t normal. Loud as I can is damn quiet when you’re in love with a super spy. But I reckon here and now I get to say it.”

“Super spy?” she says leaning in.

“The superest.”

“отродье,” she says dismissively rolling her eyes.

“I love you,” he says.
“I’ve worked it out, you know,” he says half yawn, half comment.

“What might that be?” Natasha answers not bothering to turn her head as she licks the remnants of Thai chili sauce from the corner of her bottom lip. He stretches beside her, a generous reach with joints cracking.

“You’re hoping I go into a food coma and give the night terrors a miss tonight.”

She turns then, fixing an evil smile on her lips and crawling the small distance between them. He looks surprised to find himself with arms full of Russian spy. He blinks down at her as she presses her lips to the small indent behind his ear lobe.

“If you go into a food coma how would I have my way with you?” she says low and syrup smooth.

“I’m sure you could figure out a way to bring me round,” he breathes. She can feel the slight quickening of his pulse as her cheek brushes against the thin barrier over his jugular. Despite his physical reaction his voice sounds cooler and she knows that he thinks she is playing him.

“Barton, I am serious do not fall asleep on me. I get this night.”

Clint leans back, his hands dropping from her back.

“You get every night.” He frowns. “You know that right? Any and every night. No matter what.”

“Things change tomorrow, Clint.”

His frown deepens and he stares at her for a moment then two.

“But I’m not going to,” he says with frustration. He tugs at the neck of his t-shirt, “You woulda got every night before this shit, from me, if you’d wanted them.” His sincerity is cracking the soft calm she has carefully cultivated.

“You sound ridiculous,” she says but softly; her lips curving in a small smile. She reaches up to pull him closer. He pulls back further.

“And you sound like you’re getting ready to leave. You getting ready to leave, Natasha?”

“This palace? I’d have to be a fool,” she says a little harsher than she meant it to sound.

“Oh har har, that’d be that sense of humor you keep sayin’ you have?”

Natasha slides herself back and out of his arms. Her annoyance at his repeated tiny rejections and the frustration that he is all angles and open wounds when she is not allowed to manipulate but rather must be patient, gentle and honest, curling her in on herself.

“I try not to fly in the face of public opinion,” she snarks back.

“Are you leaving, Natasha? Is that what changes tomorrow?”

“No.”

His shoulders lower. His brow smooths.
“So what changes?”

“I change tomorrow. I will be Agent Romanoff once again and you will be Agent Barton.”

He nods once. It is his short, efficient nod that she has always compartmentalized as Agent Barton and not Clint Barton. The shift in his demeanor tilts her world; she feels her hands clench in reaction but as quickly as Agent Barton appears he disappears again and Clint reaches out tucking a stray curl behind her ear.

“So you won’t be making out with me in the corridors?” he chuckles, “I guessed that much already.”

“I have never done this, Clint. Here and now, I am in stolen time. The consequences are held at bay. Tomorrow that changes, tomorrow the consequences, the realities of this begin.”

“Yeah,” he agrees glumly.

“Yes.”

“Will it still be worth it tomorrow?” he asks leaning closer once more.

“Yes.”

“Even if…”

“Yes,” she cuts him off quickly, there is no place for even if’s in her stolen time. Risk assessments are not for this. Giving in to his even ifs would give every danger a foot hold. He smiles suddenly, carelessly for a brief second and she knows that for that second Clint Barton is in stolen time, free of any idea of consequence and even if. The smile vanishes but she crawls into his lap regardless.

“And now you will give me my stolen time.”

“Ma’am, yes Ma’am,” he growls, his breath sweet and sour and his tongue salty in her mouth.

His hands are unbearably soft in her hair. His fingertips only brush at the skin of her scalp, her forehead, her cheek. They trace lightly refusing to control her movements but remain a constant reminder that he is there.

She closes her eyes and leans into him letting the last of her weight rest against his hard shoulders. The rise and fall of his chest is faster now. The temperature of his skin where she slips her hands beneath his t-shirt is warmer. She breathes deeply turning her head into the crook of his neck.

He runs the edge of his large left hand down the side of her neck and she feels herself shiver as her dopamine levels spike.

“Just like Cairo all over again,” he says.

“You and I remember Cairo very differently.”

“Yeah, well the humidity, the side streets and knife fights aside.”

“Just like Cairo.” Natasha smiles.

“Just like Cairo.”

“Take me to bed, Clint.”
The safe house is on an island outside the town of Bodø. It’s almost winter and the wind is coming in from the water in a way that rattles the window panes in the old wood. The safe house has to have seen better days if only because he refuses to believe SHIELD would start out with such crappy accommodations.

Natasha is wrapped in an olive blanket in a cot against the far wall and the radiator seems to be doing its job but she flinches almost imperceptibly every time a gust of wind comes roaring up the hill shaking the little cottage. She’s been a little off since he fished her out of the water. It was a rough hit but she seems more shaken by the sub-polar climate than the insane head of a faceless evil R and D’s refusal to stay down.

“Did I ever tell you about the tornado that hit Carson’s one particularly shitty May?” he asks trying to get enough response out of her to check her for signs of shock.

“Tornado,” she echoes without looking up.

“Tornadoes I reckon. I think we were hit with more than one and let me tell you circus tents and trailers aren’t made for getting through tornadoes.”

“Circus tents.”

“And trailers, so anyway the funnel comes straight at us and we don’t have time to make a run for it and I think this is it I’m done for. I’m 13 years old and this is it. And I climb into the costume box of the swordsman’s trailer and pull the lid down on my head just as the damn twister picks the whole fucking thing up. I reckon I went round and round in that thing forty or fifty times and all you could hear was the roar of the wind. I still swear though I could hear a dog barking and a woman laughing, cackling really, above it all.”

He scans her again, he can’t see any obvious wounds but then Natasha is a master at hiding them. He still gets shitty thinking about the time she stumbled getting into the chopper in Belfast. She doesn’t look too pale but with her skin tone it’s hard to tell. He wonders if he can get close enough to run a head to toe on her.

“And then just as it gets too much, I come crashing down and I crawl out of the box and the place is a mess and there’s a big fucking piece of wood right through one of the walls. And it’s real quiet all of the sudden and everything looks so fucking colorful.

When I kick open the trailer door I have no fucking idea where I am. And then I see this little person peering out from behind a shrub and I think it’s just Hank, who was one of the clowns, but then there are twelve more little people and in Carson’s there was just Hank and I’m like did I hit my head and then not Hank and his buddies start singing and I’m all what the everlasting fuck?”

“Barton,” she says looking up finally and giving him a clear look at her bright green eyes. Bright, focused, good.

“Yeah Tasha?” he replies idly and he stretches interlacing his hands to put behind his head.

“This is the plot to the Wizard of Oz.” Damn. You never know with Natasha what will be in her American pop culture inventory. He also never knows when she’s pretending she doesn’t know just to annoy him and derail a joke.
“Ah. You got that did you?” he smiles. She narrows her eyes.

“My name is Natasha.”

“Yeah I know.” One of her many names, the one she took for herself the day she agreed to come in, the day he made a different call.

“Why do you insist on shortening my name?”

“Cause you’re my friend, that’s what friends do,” he frowns.

“I am your partner.”

“That too.” He shrugs and scratches the back of his neck. He’ll need a haircut when they get out of here. The usual spikes of hair that he still thinks of blonde despite their darkening over the years, are flopping about his head and without a barber he’s going to need gel or some shit to keep it off his face.

“We are not friends,” she says bluntly. He looks up again trying not to react angrily.

“Sure we are Tasha. We eat together even when we aren’t on a mission. We train together, I let you kick my butt…”

“You do not let me.”

“I let you interrupt me all the time. I know you check my reports and fix all the mistakes. Hell, you get me to write the damn things in the first place which Coulson is over the fuckin’ moon about. I reckon you talk to me more than anyone else you know, you even laugh once or twice and…” he drops the faux light heartedness he’d forced into to his list, “you are gonna tell me what’s up now even though you don’t want to.”

“A good partnership requires those things.”

“Call it what you want.” He starts unbuckling his boots. “I’m still calling you Tasha.” He knows now it’s pure stubbornness that makes him insist on the nickname but there is something about the flintiness in Natasha Romanoff that makes him determined to be just as stubborn. The room is quiet for a time just the howl of the wind, the rattle of the windows and the thunk of his black boots on the floor.

“I don’t remember,” she says.

“Huh? Remember what?” For a moment he thinks she’s talking about The Wizard of Oz.

“The wind. I don’t remember the wind and yet I do not want to be here. I feel as if something bad is coming. I feel as if I have…” There is something haunted in the way she looks at him. He freezes for a second, his mind running down the sketchy details of the Red Room training program her original SHIELD file contained. Triggers and memory modification, little girls as lab rats, she makes it easy to forget with her cool professionalism and her unparalleled grace.

“Hey Tasha it’s okay. I reckon sometimes it’s better to forget, you know?”

“I have forgotten much,” she says pulling the blanket tighter around herself.

“Clearly not the plot to the Wizard of Oz,” he grins. “We’ll get you better memories.” She stands but he keeps talking hoping more words will fix whatever it is he as fucked up this time. “Stuff that
happens in romantic comedies, stuff with too much food and girly pajamas and road trips.” She walks towards him, he lift his chin to watch her, “Yeah good road trips, with road side attractions made out of old beer bottles, road trips that don’t end with you having to electrocute a mad scientist. Good memories.”

“Why?” she asks as she sits beside him on his cot.

“Why what?” he repeats fighting the sudden urge to shift away from her.

“Why do you care so much about my memories?”

“Because you’re my friend. Cause you’ve got my back and I’ve got yours.”

“You have my back.” She nods once. It’s familiar and he wonders if she picked it up from him.

“Yeah Tasha.”

She’s quiet again. She doesn’t shift or fidget like he does when he isn’t working. It bugs him less and less now.

“Clint?” she says like she has used his name a thousand times before. She never has, on a mission he is Hawkeye and in their down time he is Barton, to Natasha he has never been Clint. It should sound new and special in her mouth but it doesn’t, it sounds as old and worn as it always has.

“Yeah?”

“I think I may have a burn on my right arm.” She lets her blanket drop.

“Shit. Say something next time. Electrocuting that fucker?”

“The bite malfunctioned. I need to pull back my suit to treat it. I need help.”

“What are friends for?” he says as she unzips her suit exposing her back and the sports bra she wears beneath. He drags the med kit out from beneath his cot. The tin scratches against the floor boards before he pops it open.

“That is a rhetorical question, no?”

“Yeah Tasha,” he agrees watching her pull her left arm from the suit.

“Okay, here put your hand right here,” he orders putting her free hand palm down on his upper thigh. Natasha scowls and even from this angle he can see her disgust. He shakes his head a little, huffing out an irritated breath. “Don’t look at me like that. In a second I’m gonna peel back your cat suit and you’re gonna dig those claws of yours into my thigh. I’m not getting you to cop a feel I’m giving up my personal safety for your pain relief. Anybody else would say thank you.”

“Thank you,” she says and it sounds real and not robotic. She says two simple words and they are not sarcastic or forced. He stops the flinch before it can give him away.

“Jesus Tasha. Don’t go being anybody else,” he mutters as he settles her against his chest. Her hair brushes against his chin, the width of her cream colored back pressing against the black undershirt he always wears beneath his tac vest. Clint eases the last inch of her cat suit’s sleeve down before asking “You ready?” he doesn’t wait for a response, “On three. One.” He yanks the sleeve from her forearm.

“Fuck you American shithead!”
He chuckles at that even as he gets a good look at the red raw burn where her window’s bite would sit. It’s a combination of American slang, Russian invective and the unNatsaha like lack of stoicism that keeps him grinning even as he grabs a saline pouch.

“Yep that’s an electrical burn alright,” he says extracting her nails from his thigh. “This is just saline. We’ll be out of here in the morning; I’m not gonna fuck with it. This is just first aid.” He pours the first pouch over the wound, cleaning it as gently as he can, flushing without debriding. Her suit has stuck to the site causing some damage as it came away. It looks like a flash burn but he can’t rule out less superficial tissue damage.

“Anyone else would have waited until two to pull back,” she says through teeth that would be clenched on another human being.

“Yeah well anybody else would be underestimating you my friend. Next time you tell me straight away.” He soaks a sterile pad in saline and lays it lightly over her burn.

“Weakness,” she says like it leaves a bad taste in her mouth.

“I’m not gonna tell anyone,” he raises his eyebrows unable to see what is going on in those green eyes of hers from this angle.

“Weakness,” she says again softly and he thinks he hears a little of a москва accent in the word.

“Agree to disagree on that,” he says as he pulls the rough blanket back up her shoulders, “Rest okay? I’ll keep watch. You want another blanket?”

“No.”

“I’ll, uh, take your cot, you stay here.”

“Stay here?” she says suddenly turning her head against his shoulder. “I do not wish to move.”

“Okay.”

When his arm goes round her throat she struggles. Her injured arm comes up scratching his face. She pulls and claws at the arm around her throat. Her mouth is agape but with no sound escaping. She hasn’t taken a deep breath but her lung capacity is excellent. A minute more and she’ll start to turn grey if he can hold her as firmly as he is doing now. She twists kicking her legs. His face is pressed into the nest of red hair at the crown of her head. He says nothing.

This isn’t how it happened. She slept fitfully her back against his shoulder. The wind seeping into her dreams and making her frown even in unconsciousness. He kept the dressings damp and his position neutral even as he wished for his own cot and his quiver to inventory. Now she kicks and struggles against him. He knows that had he not been the man she was beginning to consider a friend she would never have relaxed enough for him to get the jump on her. The Black Widow, черная вдова slowly dying in his arms. Natasha Romanoff dying of the weakness she so despises.

“Clint! Hawkeye! Agent Barton! Черт! Clint, wake up.”

Even as she scratches and fights her voice is clear.

“Clint!”

He gasps. His eyes snap open.
“I am not dead. You are not screaming,” she says breathing heavily with the fight to wake him. She leans over him, red hair swinging in her face.

“Tasha?”

“Yes. Alive. Safe. Here.”


“Breathe Clint.” She is too close, much too close for someone he was choking only seconds ago.

“Water.” He moves off the bed pushing his back against the wall. Natasha nods and leaves the room. His hands move to his face expecting scratches he knows cannot be there. “Breathe Barton, Breathe,” he murmurs to himself.

“Clint? Water,” she says moving silently across his bedroom with a glass in hand.

A gust of wind blows through his open window and he can’t stop the shudder. She looks back over her shoulder quizzically. When the next gust rattles the window pane he lets out a low moan. Natasha turns again examining him through the gloom of reflected street lights.

“Norway,” she says.

“Bodø.”

“The island with the wind coming off the water.”

He can only nod in response. She is here, she is alive, she is real.

“The night you said we were friends.”

He swallows hard. She moves closer handing him the water before moving back, carefully reading his body language.

“It was different this time?” she asks.

When he looks back up at her he half expects to see a girl with long red hair and a SHIELD cat suit pulled down to her waist. Instead she is a naked woman with cropped hair and undisguised in her analysis of him.

“No. It was exactly the same until I wrapped my arm around your throat and waited for you to die. It was quiet and… and…”

“Intimate,” she finishes for him.

“Yeah. Intimate. For a fucking serial killer.”

Natasha blinks and looks down, “I remember Norway very differently.”

“I’m beginning to think we don’t remember anything the same,” he says bitterly pressing the water glass to his lips.

“I remember the look on your face when you described the memories you were going to make me.” She smiles in the shadows as he swallows his water. It may be a trick of the low light but she almost looks wistful.
“You remember that?” he says wondering what on earth had been in his face that night.

“I remember considering for the first time that I could have a friend if I chose to.”

“I remember telling you you didn’t have much of a choice.”

“Clint I always have a choice.”

“Yeah?” he asks pulling himself away from the wall.

“Yes,” she answers slipping her long legs back under his clean sheets.
Finger spelling

The first doors they pass through slide apart unimposingly as if they had merely entered a mall and not the place that for all its familiarity she knows will be their undoing as much as it is their making. Only further within the hive like structure of SHIELD will she need to press her thumb print to unobtrusive panels and speak her name, designation and clearance level to move the elevators. Here, she and Clint are in the warm embrace of the structural equivalent of Phil Coulson’s cool and calming smile.

The Agent at the front desk looks up as if she is nothing more than a receptionist and the blue tooth attached to her ear nothing more than a high tech way of answering phones. Natasha catches the micro expression of shock on the young woman’s face when she scans Clint. Natasha finds herself hoping that the strain of returning has kept her partner’s sights off the woman long enough that he has not noticed.

She chances a glance in his direction to find his eyes on her hands. She tilts her head, confused momentarily as she follows his gaze to the way she holds her left wrist with her right hand a position she falls into that is both prepared and relaxed. Clint shakes his head infinitesimally.

“Psych is on sixth,” she says.

“I know where it is, Romanoff,” he replies walking to the elevators without waiting for her. His jaw clenches as he passes, his boots hit the marble louder than they did on the street outside. “Agent Clint Barton. Level Seven. Sixth floor. PSYCH,” he barks at the reflective walls as the doors close around them. He rolls his shoulders back and down and blows a heavy breath through his nose.

He is Agent Barton now, Agent Barton after a bad mission, Agent Barton when they should have had an extraction plan. She can see the absences in his eyes and the way he avoids his reflection without looking away. As much as she has seen them both play these roles in countless identical elevators in too many bases the world over, he is too far away now by mere fractions of an inch but too far away regardless. She looks down at her hands again the grip of her right hand around her left wrist and the slightly widened stance that would allow her to drop into fighting stance a moment quicker.

She almost finds herself filling the silence with frivolous comments about taking him to target practice when the ordeal is done. She stops the thought before it is even fully formed. This isn’t her and more importantly this isn’t them. She looks back up to stare down her own image.

“Natasha,” he says abruptly but the doors open and his voice drops away just as she turns to him. He blinks before seeming to decide to let whatever had made him speak go, he turns on his heels and she follows him out.

Psych looks like Logistics, like statistics, like intelligence with precise rows of steel and black doors each with a silver panel for identification. Beyond the doors these rooms are different, some like interrogation cells, some like med bays and some like offices, purpose built to yield results, the right kind of results. She dislikes each room personally.

At the end of the hall there is a waiting room, if a row of black and steel chairs can be considered a waiting room. She will wait here for as long as necessary, part of her knowing she will wait to be certain he leaves those rooms be they an interrogation cell, a med bay or an office. Natasha knows each of those rooms, intimately, though they were part of another base and another time and she will not leave him to them.
“Agent Barton? Agent Romanoff,” a suit clad Agent approaches them from the far end. Clint nods resting his hands behind his back. “We have called in Dr Caudwell. She will meet you here. Agent Romanoff there is no need to wait.”

“There may not be a need but I will wait regardless.”

“Yes Ma’am.”

Clint waits until the Agent has left, the man’s hair is slicked back and dark and reminding Natasha of men throwing money around Roma as easily as they did their hands as they spoke. Clint sits in the seat furthest from where they stand before frowning and looking up at her.

“They think you’re babysitting me,” he says lowly because they both know the suit clad agent isn’t the only one keeping an eye on them.

“They think I kill for fun and that you convinced me to join SHIELD with the power of your cock. What they think? When have we cared for what they think?”

He looks sadly at her, quiet for a moment, only his sadness and his eyes examining her face for companionship. Then he speaks, “Maybe we oughta.”

He’d brought her in. The first time it was the real interrogation cells and then med bays and then months of programming being pulled from her like electricians stripping wiring. She hated him and she had hated SHIELD but never as much as she had hated the Red Room or what she had become in the space between Natalia and Natasha. She had hated them but she was always consoled by the structure, the rules, the new principles that could be bent around her fragile new life like an iron lung.

But for every rule and ethical brace SHIELD had provided to an indebted Natasha she had watched as her partner instead chafed and struggled against them as if they were gilded cages or clippers for his hawk wings. He had hated the rules but craved the work, bit back at the structure but treasured the ideals.

He had. She had. Their world is spinning off its secure axis and that axis is Agent Phil Coulson.

She sits down beside him not answering his statement, let him fill her silence with a probing ‘Natasha’ if he really believes they should care for the thoughts of people incapable of understanding people like them.

He gives a huff, leaning back in his chair before his right knee begins to bounce beneath his palm. There is a rubber soled thump, thump, thump of his heel hitting the ground. She turns to him quietly raising an eyebrow in askance. He doesn’t return her look, staring at the far wall his hands tense against his knees. Thump, thump, thump.

On his left hand there is the fading outline made by brown skin surrounded by browner skin that spreads from his wrist to his three middle fingers. On his right hand on the knuckle of his thumb there is a callous made by the rest of his favorite bow. Beneath his jeans his left knees is still strapped and she knows this because she ran her own finger tips over each strip of tape pressing it firmly to his skin.

Beneath her shirt, under the rise of her collar bone, is a bruise like no other on her body. This bruise was made by the press of his lips and the desperate pull of his mouth against her skin. On her hands his smell still lingers.

She knows why his heel beats out an erratic rhythm against the floor. She knows why he looked
with resignation at her stance. She knows that SHIELD will change them. But Natasha knows that
should they try to take this from her, the knowledge of his skin, the heated push of them against each
other, the way that he is her beginning, she will burn them to the ground.

She breathes deeply sliding her hand beneath his on his right knee. She allows her features to
change conveying nothing but mild irritation. He looks back towards her as she twist her hand palm
up. For a moment palm to palm she lets them rest as she says “Stop Barton.”

"Annoying you?” he says as if he couldn’t care less about her irritation.

“Is there any way I could answer that would make you stop?” she asks rolling her eyes. Beneath his
hand her middle, ring and little fingers curl against her palm then still momentarily before they move
again all her fingers curling to meet at her thumbnail. His knee stops bouncing and he looks away,
his palm still face down against hers. Her fingers stretch again this time forming a two fingered
peace sign and then they shift again all four fingers curling downward against her thumb. A pause
and then she moves again what would be her bow string finger pressing down against her palm and
then they curl again as if she were holding an invisible ball, the tips of her fingers touching the tip of
her thumb. There is one last shape to make and she feels Clint hold his breath beside her as she
straightens her middle and index finger pressing them against each other as her thumb holds her ring
and little finger against her palm.

He breathes again and gives his short nod, “Nah. Trick question. You wanna try answering it
anyway?”

She moves to take her hand from beneath his but he presses down sharply and then quickly his hand
fists before spreading again his pinkie, his index and his thumb moving from his hand in quick
succession before he releases her. It’s a risk, anyone watching should be familiar with such an
obvious ASL sign but she knows it isn’t in Clint Barton’s nature to let her declaration go unanswer.

"No,” she answers, "I am only allowed to hit you for training purposes."
I meant it

No more than thirty seconds passed the hour the black and stainless steel door opens. Dr Caudwell, all stiff ash blonde bun and a well-tailored business suit shaped around explicitly empathetic body language, exits first. Natasha narrows her eyes, it is like clay laid over flint. Clint follows doing his best impression of disinterest. He looks paler, he looks jaundice. This morning against the purple grey of his kitchen she would have said it was impossible for him to look paler.

“Agent Barton,” the doctor says.

“Dr Caudwell,” Clint returns formally. The Doctor returns to her room shutting the door before Natasha can see which of her nightmares they had had him inside.

Clint looks up at her standing further down the hallway he gives the barest of shrugs. She swallows softly as he tilts his head gesturing minutely to the elevators. She loosens her grip around her own wrist as he turns. He waits for her in the elevator neither turning to look at her nor speaking.

“1st floor,” she snaps. The mechanism needs no identification for the lobby and she is quickly dispirited by the idea of referring to herself as Agent Romanoff.

They are back on the street weaving between pedestrians blending in in the way he’s always called her Marilyn Munroe manoeuvre. It was a reference that she’d failed to understand assuming he’d be making some bitter comment on the beauty she traded on. It had been months before she bit down on her hatred of admitting he was getting to her and demanded he explain himself. He’d gaped at first and then softly but without condescension he’d explained. Marilyn Munroe, he’d said, had had the ability to switch off the most desired woman in the world and switch her back on in the blink of an eye. Marilyn Munroe could blend in as quickly and as neatly as she did and he would never tire of watching it. Then he had grinned and returned to his food never to mention again that she had not known something.

She is thinking about the way he is infuriating right up to the point that she cannot take it and then in a second he stops and lets her be, wondering how he learned to read her so well when he reaches out and grabs her hand. She flexes her fingers and laces them between his. “Coffee?” he asks his voice rough.

“Yes,” she answers. She scans the street up ahead for a coffee shop or café they can slip into and finds herself caught off guard a moment later when he growls at her.

“Aw hell. Fuck it Nat.” He pulls oh her hand dragging her suddenly into an alley way. He doesn’t pull her off her feet, she doesn’t search the faces of the crowds for what signs she can that they are in dangers, she willingly follows as he backs her towards exposed brick.

“Barton?”

“Clint, Natasha, Clint.”

“Clint?” she asks before he slides his hand into her hair and crushes his lips against hers. She leans in opening her mouth to his insistent tongue, her fingertips stroking at the undersides of his upper arms. When she is pressed against the brick, his cupped hand barely touching her cheeks, she is in Alexanderplatz.

It takes some time for her to push back at him ripping her mouth from his despite her willingness to
stay with him like this for longer than is safe or sensible.

“Clint?” she asks.

“Nat. I fucked up. I fucked this up.” He drops his hands from her hair spreading them out between them.

“Fucked what up?”

“Us. Strike Team Delta’s done. It’s gonna be months at least before they let me back out into the field. Coulson’s gone.”

“He is not dead Clint.”

“But he is gone. He’s not our handler anymore. There’s not an ‘us’ to be a handler for,” he says moving away from her to kick at the wall. “Dammit, you'll be reassigned in no time. You’ll get a new team and I’ll be seeing the inside of that psych department day in and day out until… until…” he continues as though he can no longer picture what success would look like.

“Until it isn’t sharp and brittle any more. Clint, breathe.” He looks back up at her then, his blue eyes flashing in the wells of dark circles. He nods and takes a deep breath for her benefit as much as his own.

“I told them about the dreams.”

“Good.”

“They know what Loki told you.”

“I know,” she says following him with her eyes as he paces, allowing her shoulders to roll back and down.

“The Doc, she asked me if I thought I was a danger to you.”

“What did you say?”

“I said no,” he answers stilling for a moment. She can smell the acrid odor of decaying vegetables that rest in the dumpster.

“Good,” she nods. Now they can leave this place. He has confessed his negligible sins and they are allowed to move forward. Forward and away from dumpsters and rotting food.

“’Cause Agent Romanoff would snap my neck in four moves,” he adds.

“Three,” she grins knowing when she does that he can see the feral pleasure of it underneath the smile. Clint doesn’t smile back. His eyes cloud over before he shut them and then her out entirely.

“I told them I thought I was a danger to other people. I told them I was a danger to myself.”

“What?” she demands moving towards him, “Clint why? Why would you say that? To them?”

“Cause it’s true Tash,” he says as if truth has ever mattered in this, they’ve always known what was applicable information and what was a misguided trip down the rabbit hole. SHIELD knows they keep things back, hording inappropriate reactions and their own ledgers like they are talismans against becoming unpeople. He carries on ignorant of her horror, “I’ve got all the skills to be dangerous and right now… fuck… right now I’m crawling outta my own skin, everyone feels like a
threat. Everyone.”

“You trust them?” she asks quietly failing to disguise the rebuke in her voice.

“No,” he says, “Yes? More than I trust myself right now.”

“More than you trust me?”

“Tasha,” he says his voice a warning.

“You are going back?”

“I have an hour. A little less than an hour now.” An hour, he says, like it is all the time he needs. She hates him for it, for not staying longer, for staying too long, for coming back out of that black and stainless steel door instead of never coming out.

“Why?”

“I said I needed to get some things. I said you’d be keeping an eye on me,” he tilt his head hopefully.

“You are leaving me,” her voice as flat as she feels. She tries to hold on to the anger she feels towards him and his choice but it is twisting inside her that she brought him here when he was trying to run.

“Jesus Christ Natasha!” he snaps and she battles instinct not to shift into fighting stance. “You don’t want this. Babysitting me while PTSD or Loki or both eat out my brain?” he yells his back turned to the busy street drowning out his words for the bystanders. He swallows hard, veins distinct on the surface of his neck. “I go in, I get better,” he growls lower, “They’ll make me better,” he says his fist clenching and unclenching. “They fuckin’ have to ‘cause… ‘cause letting you go out there on your own, it’ll kill me. They’ll put you with the best. They have to, you’re the best. It wouldn’t be fair on anyone else.”

“It will not be regardless.” She cross her arms across her chest.

“Play nice Red,” he says moving closer and she knows it is unconsciously but it is still a little of the old Clint smoothing down her sharp edges and acting the pathfinder.

“And you?” she says raising an eyebrow, “I know what they do in those rooms Barton.”

He gazes at her, searches her face and agrees, “You do.” He gives a short nod. “And you brought me back here because you know it might save me.”

“Less than an hour?”

“Walk back with me?” he asks.

“SHIELD expects me to, no?”

“Yeah but I don’t.”

“You expect me to leave?” she says letting her arms slip from her chest.

“I think,” he smiles a small smile as he speaks, “you always have a choice.” When she moves again in tacit agreement she can see some of the tension slip from his shoulders. He turns towards the alleys entry way.
“I meant what I said,” she says to his half turned back. He turns back towards her his eyebrows raised in surprise. Clint licks his bottom lip before answering.

“I know.”

“I did not lie,” she says again.

“I know Tasha, I know.”
They didn't want it anyway. It had blood all over it.

She leads him down the stairs to the subway or he leads her neither one wishing to waste their hour on walking or cabs. In his apartment he stuffs dirty clothes back into his duffel bag and pulls his favorite bow from the closet. Natasha wedges herself between the door and the bookshelf, one foot flat against the wall and her arms crossed.

Clint walks absentmindedly from one room to the next mumbling to himself. She follows him with her eyes. Listening to his grunts as he searches beneath his bed and in the back of closets, she does not smile.

“Got it,” he crows finally.

“Got what Barton?” she asks as his head pops from his bedroom.

“Here. Take this,” he strides towards her shoving a small box into her hand. “Don’t open it! Open it later. When I’m not here. It’s just something stupid.”

“That’s encouraging.”

“Yeah, well,” he shrugs “I’m not good at romantic shit okay. But I want you to have it. You can make me pay for it later.”

“Romantic Shit? Clint this isn’t!” her eyes grow wide despite herself.

“What? God no!” he rushes, “I mean I’m nuts but not that nuts. No. No. It’s just something small and… you know what give it back.” Clint makes a grab for the box.

“убирайся!” she pulls her hand back, “You gave it to me. You are not getting it back.”

“Seriously, Tasha, give it back now.”

“No don’t open it now!” he snaps pulling her wrist away, “Jesus. You’re lucky you’re so damn hot or I swear….”

“You swear what?” she asks looking pointedly at her wrist wrapped in his hand.

“I woulda ditched you a long time ago. That’s what,” he says dropping her wrist before muttering sarcastically “Good for nothin’, trouble making red head.”

“Really?” she asks pouting prettily, “Only put up with me because you think I’m sexy?”

“Pretty much,” he grumbles resting his arm on the wall above her head. He leans over, the last vestiges of the morning’s coffee and subway rides clinging to his skin.

“Bringing me presents in little blue boxes because you think I’m sexy?” she leans forward to whisper in his ear.

“Yeah, yeah.”

She slips lithely beneath his arm, he catches her and she turns in his grip grinning before she flips once, twice, landing across the room. She flicks her hair back from her face and then dangles the
small box from its white ribbon, “Letting me open the box because you think I’m sexy?”

“Natasha.” She can tell he is getting fed up with the cutie act. She looks down at the box examining it properly for the first time since he shoved it into her hand. It is a very particular shade of blue.

“How long has this been here Clint?”

“Not long,” he answers firmly, his eyes sharp across the room.

“It’s covered in dust.” She raises an eyebrow, “Either your housekeeping is a biological hazard or it’s been here months.”

“For fuck sake just open the damn thing already.”

“If you insist,” she presses her lips together as she smiles. Tugging at the ribbon it comes loose in her hand and then the box separates.

“I’m not tryin’ to stake some sort of claim or anythin’… I just well…” he says moving slowly across the room as if he was approaching a wild animal and not his partner. His hands are spread out in front of him telegraphing his lack of a weapon even though he knows his hands are a weapon in and of themselves. She finds herself staring at the glinting gold object in the box.

“It’s an arrow,” she says quietly and he stops suddenly in front of her.

“Yeah.”

“It’s an arrow necklace,” she repeats looking up at him. He looks sheepish and uncomfortable and she wonders why he bought it if it made him feel that way.

“I know you don’t normally wear jewellery.”

“I don’t,” she agrees easily.

“Okay then,” he says his left hand coming up to scratch the back of his neck, “It was for you. I wanted you to have it before I left. Put it in a drawer somewhere or something.”

“Thank you.”

“Huh?”

“Thank you,” she says again.

“Oh, okay,” his eyebrows are raised but he stops scratching at his neck letting his hand fall by his side. She smiles softly and waits. He shifts his weight off his left knee, a cautious smile making its way onto his lips.

“Clint, this is when you help with me with the clasp.”

“You’re puttin’ it on?”

“No,” she gestures again to the open box, “You are putting it on me.”

“Is that the best idea?” he asks but he takes the small box from her open hand nonetheless.

“Afraid I’ll bite?”
“Yeah,” he grins tiredly pulling the gold arrow from the box before shrugging, “And maybe afraid you won’t.” She laughs softly in answer lifting the curls of her hair from the nape of her neck.

Behind her he fiddles with the clasp, “I think this is the first time anyone has bought me jewellery,” she says.

“Nah, plenty of guys have bought you jewellery and cars, houses, trips to Paris.”

“Men buy Natalie, Nadia and Yvette those things, Men tend to stand very still around Natasha,” she says as he fixes the clasp and she lets her hair drop.

“I bought you vodka and that snow globe with Notre Dame in it.” Through his rough voice heavy with exhaustion and anxiety she can still hear the man who wanted to give her better memories, the man who despite the horrors she’d inflicted wished to be for her the person he’d needed when he was younger. He offers up a battered snow globe with the French cathedral in place of love, security and hope. She knows he is offering up what it stood for ‘You and me, Tasha, I’ve got your back, you’ve got mine.’

“Yes you did.”

“May have stolen the snow globe,” he reaches out and touches the arrow against her skin, pulling away quickly like it burned or might melt away to nothingness.

“Yes you did.”

He shrugs again an effort to excuse his behavior or lighten the weight of the moment she isn’t sure, “They didn’t want it anyway. It had blood all over it.”

She smiles pressing two fingers to the small gold arrow and wondering if he had said those words before perhaps to Fury or Coulson almost a decade ago.
Orders, followed or ignored

She visits the day before she leaves for Washington DC.

The best of the best it turns out is America’s iconic WWII hero and she suspects she’s been shunted into his team in the hope that he’ll keep her in line and that she’ll do what Steve Rogers just won’t. He won’t get her jokes, she thinks fleetingly when the briefing packet arrives and then instantly wonders if that’s how Clint has felt teaching a Russian teenaged assassin all the pieces of the world she’d missed out on in the Red Room.

She tucks her necklace beneath the neck of her jacket before she leaves the hotel room. She had felt awkward returning to Clint’s apartment and chose to avoid the image of impropriety or perhaps she was merely avoiding the emotions his not being there might bring to the surface, it was harder to tell these days.

They’ve never been ones to keep in touch much when they are on separate missions. A call here or there if it could be swung, an unanswered coded text, information passed back through Coulson or Hill, they never needed much more than that to remain what they are to each other. Tuesday last week she’d stopped by the cafeteria at base having handed in more paperwork, he’d sat down opposite, stolen a fry from her plate and said “How about we burn it all down and run, Romanoff?”

She’d chewed on her cherry tomato thoughtfully before answering, “But then who would we lie and kill for?”

“No chance we’d go straight?” his gaze was focused and clear.

“I’d give you five minutes before you returned to a life of crime out of sheer boredom.”

“We should run,” he’d said again.

“Barton?” she asked as he looked over his shoulder.

“Yeah…” he’d said non-committally, “might still be him.”

“You’re him. Barton’s no runner and I…” she froze then before lowering her voice, “this is my better way.” He looked back, his eyebrows raising minutely.

“Yeah, okay, not gonna take away your better way. Plus you’re right the boredom would kill me.”

“Tell me.”

“Black Widow doesn’t know everything?” he said smiling and crossed his arms.

“Or I require confirmation,” she answered smartly. He was wearing his weatherproof uniform jacket and fingerless gloves and she wondered if he was still cold.

“Something’s off. Some days… aw it might just be paranoia.” He shrugged it off but she had seen his fingertips press a little harder into his cupped right elbow. He breathed in a second quicker than he should have, his shoulders hunching in effort instead of falling easy with each smooth breath.

“Paranoia has been a good friend to us these past eight years,” she said leaning forward gradually, no fast movements to indicate that he had said anything of particular interest.

“Some days,” he growled a little at the back of his throat indicative of a level of frustration that had
become his default since PEGASUS and his capture. “Some days,” he repeated rolling his eyes preemptively at the possibly faulty reasoning that would follow, “I think they are more interested in working out how God of Douches controlled me than they are in fixing me.”

He looked healthier, if only by inches, the dark circles that sunk his stormy eyes into his skull receding. They had been making him eat and sleep regardless. Perhaps there would always be a pragmatic level of investigation into just how they’d done it that Natasha accepted without fuss and Clint balked at with reassuring regularity, if he was healing she could and would ignore the dark waters they swam in.

“The dreams?” she’d asked seeking out the information most pertinent even as he seemed to only focus on the red hair curling under her chin.

“Getting closer to New Mexico.” A tiny contraction in the right orbicularis oculi. Bow string fingers flexed and contracted against his palm.

“No better?” He looked up in response, his eyes studying the repetitive checker board of dull grey and off white squares. He seemed to register her unwavering gaze and with a shrug of resignation slid himself lower in the chair.

“I wake up quicker I think… you still die.”

“I am still here.” His eyes flickered back to her face as she spoke.

“I’m getting quicker realizing that too.”

“That’s positive,” she said as she rested her fork on her plate. She actively fought the screaming in her fingers, the desire to cross the short distance and to tangle her fingers in his. The corner of his mouth twitched, a wince or a smile she wasn’t sure. He shook himself free.

“I should get back.”

“Yes.”

“See ya around Red,” he said stealing another fry as he squinted down at her.

“I’m sure you will Barton,” she’d replied swatting at his hand and play acting a role that no longer felt hers.

Now she raps on his door.

“I know! Ten minutes.” She can hear the thump of his boots against the metal floor of his quarters.

“Barton?”

“Natasha?” he says opening the door a t-shirt over his arms but not yet over his head. “Sorry. Juniors keep coming down here to remind me of the schedule.” He pulls the t-shirt over his head as he steps back allowing her entry. He begins tugging the material down over his stomach and she ignores the way she wants to reach out and adjust his clothing for him. She ignores the desire to gauge the temperature of his skin by pressing her hands to hard line of abdominal muscles above his belt.

“You’d think you had a history of not showing up to briefings or ignoring orders,” she says dryly.

“Never the important ones.”

“Important according to you,” she cocks her head to the side as he runs his hands back through his
“Trust yourself first Nat. Trust yourself first.” And then he smiles, a light smile, almost familiar but not yet the Clint of old, still she cannot help but return the smile.

“How’s that going for you?” she asks turning to shut his door behind her. He raises his eyebrows and the smile slips from his lips.

“Fucked if I know, Fury says he wants to see me this afternoon.”

“Summons from Fury. Important?”

“I won’t be skipping out on it,” he replies and she leans back against the door. There will be ears in here. They both know it. They don’t resent it, they are full grown spies even if Clint has always insisted he is a soldier and not a spy. She licks her bottom lip before saying what she has actually come to say. She doesn’t grin when she sees the way his eyes follow the movement of her tongue.

“They’re sending me to DC.”

“Right,” he says blandly, but he moves forward and then smoothly rests a hand on her hip.

“Rogers’ strike team,” she clarifies.

“How are you going to go following orders?” he asks his voice sounding like he is laughing at her despite the obvious concentration on his face.

“I follow orders.”

“For a given definition of follow,” he smirks and his thumb begins to trace a light pattern against her skin lifting the edge of her t-shirt and jacket. She could argue, she should argue, if there is anyone in this partnership who disregards orders it’s the hawk and not the widow but Natasha is enjoying Clint’s touch for the first time in weeks and her competitive streak quiets a little in comparison.

“Watch your back,” she says lightly and brushes her hand against his cheek. His eyes change, concentration shifting into a softer regret and apology.

“And you watch yours,” he echoes immediately. He drops his hand from her waist and steps back before collecting his jacket from the bed. “Keep an eye out for the Captain too.”

“Developed a soft spot for Rogers?” she raises an eyebrow.

“Soft spot, no. But…” he pauses his head tilting as he threads his arm into the jacket, “he needs a partner. You’re the best one I know.”

“I’ve got a partner.” Natasha moves closer, lifting her chin as she speaks. Clint smiles and with a single finger taps her manubrium and the tiny arrow that lies beneath the neck of her jacket.

“Yeah you do. Don’t break DC,” he adds before gesturing to the door. Natasha lets annoyance flash across her face before she flicks the latch open.

“Don’t jump through windows.”
How about we burn it all down and run, Romanoff?

It is nearly two months since she left for DC when the first postcard arrives. It’s worse for wear, the red and white lighthouse on its front sun bleached and dappled but it’s still clear who has sent it. Scrawled in pencil on its back is are the words ‘wish you were here’ but no name, fake or otherwise signs the platitude. She fixes it to the fridge door in the apartment she’s taken, even faded the colors of the Newfoundland coast stand out against the minimalism of a place that clearly is not a home.

Weeks later a photo arrives the postage mark reads Rathenow, the image is of a German Castle taken from the banks of a river. If she had to lay down money she’d say it was the Elbe, on its reverse is a scrawl ‘wish you were here’. The photo joins the postcard on the refrigerator held on by a magnet shaped like the Washington monument.

Rogers accepts her presence in the team without question. It does not feel like trust, instead in her head she hears Tennyson and the light brigade. She’d call him a fool if he did trust her. She thinks him naive for feeling duty bound to have her. She asks herself what Clint would do and finds she has no answers but the image of a scruffy man, a sheepish grin shining through a less than helpful shrug. He is no help and yet she is glad she can still find him somewhere.

A few days pass before another arrives, a church with greened copper roof and the name Poznan. The postage mark is further east. She slips the card beneath the Washington monument letting the writing face outwards, ‘wish you were here’.

Her hair grows longer and suddenly she can no longer bear the curls that hang limp round her face. The only time her bed feels anything less than empty is the first hours after an op when bruising and exhaustion fill it for her. When she lets herself think about it she thinks that it has happened too fast that a few stolen weeks should not have made such irrevocable changes to the way she defines ‘home’ and ‘empty’.

Green hills and the word ‘Lietuva’ greet her when next she returns. She turns the card over in her hand tracing the words on the back with her fingertip ‘wish you were here’ the tell-tale smear of the silver graphite spreading from each letter by the brushing of his left hand.

The next morning there is spires at sunrise with script declaring the scenery is in Riga, she suspects where he is headed now. She has suspected for some time. The card declares like all the others ‘wish you were here’. Soon, she supposes, the script will change and become Cyrillic, the spires will be onion in shape. She wonders if he will still wish she was there then.

She dries her hair straight and allows it to brush against her shoulders when she walks. She doesn’t bother to hide the gold arrow beneath her jackets. She buys another magnet to hold the postcards against the refrigerator. She finds a blanket, a wine colored wool that she wraps around herself as she reads through briefing packets.

When she wakes in the early hours of the morning she stares at the cream ceiling and wonders how she died this night. She spends too many minutes searching through drawers and her luggage to find a very specific t-shirt. She pulls it over her head and returns to sleep ignoring the mess she leaves on the floor surrounding the bed.

There are times over the next few days when she thinks of him the most of all. The way Rogers looks at her when she admits that almost getting killed on the ship was possibly her fault, he doesn’t turn on her all phony horror and say, “Nat?! Your fault? Never!” or offer her a hand she doesn’t need and hoot like he is only in it for the adrenalin rush. Steve Rogers looks at her like she is every
lie he has ever been told and every liar who has told them. She cannot dispute the call, there is no
evidence that she is to be trusted. She steels herself and slides into an unspoken accusation that
Rogers is naive, if she is a liar then she is determined to lie to herself.

When she watches Fury die the wrong man is beside her. It should be Clint and not Rogers listening
in as she fails to prevent her pleading. There is no one to kick the wall in a way that makes her slip
feel less exposing.

The Winter Soldier, not even Clint knows everything she remembers or almost remembers about the
ghost with the metal arm. She fears those memories and she fears the sense of kinship. She tells the
Captain enough, no more.

Drying her hair she tells herself that Clint would want her to be someone Rogers trusts, he’d tell her
that Rogers needs a partner not just someone to set him up on blind dates. He’d conveniently leave
off anything about her being someone people could trust. He wouldn’t start that argument leaving it
there unsaid and unchallengeable. So she abandons the thought about wanting to be someone Rogers
can trust. She doesn’t know how to be Clint’s Natasha to a naive super soldier with hackneyed
greatest generation morals and a puppy dog look that makes him impossible to kick.

When Sam Wilson demands medical attention for her shoulder she doesn’t have the strength to
cringe. Sam Wilson, a good man in a fight, she can see why the Captain likes him but this isn’t war
and no one is obeying laws or conventions here. He’s right of course without a way to stop the
bleeding she’s going to pass out and soon. She’s been betting that her skill set is just too valuable to
let her die, she’s been hoping if the world goes black there will still be a point where she wakes up
again, a point where she gets to slap Clint Barton when he gets his damn ass back to the States.

It is bullshit. That is not how dendrotoxin works. She scowls as the doctor works on her shoulder.
She isn’t supposed to launch into Russian slurs and physical threats, it would only destroy what
chance they have for keeping the Captain on their side. She watches Hill closely as she nods
imperceptibly, later then but they will tell her. This time they will tell her everything beginning with
the location of her partner.

She thinks of him one last time before she uploads. Pierce is a posturing fool thinking he can scare
her with her own past. She thinks of his past, the one that isn’t hers to expose, the one he’s traded
back and forth with her, a truth for a truth. She thinks of his present, where ever he is now and how
much danger this one stroke will place him in. She thinks of the future and then she uploads, his
voice in her head, “How about we burn it all down and run, Romanoff?”
Any spy worth her salt

Chapter Notes

Whilst I refuse to acknowledge Age of Ultron, PLEASE, please don't read this if you are attempting to remain spoiler free. There isn't much in the way of spoilers in this chapter but I am still attempting to salvage what I can from the film. Forewarned is forearmed my friends.

She went to ground telling the Captain that all her covers were burnt. Rogers would say that was a lie if he ever got the full truth. But then Captain America didn’t understand that a lie of omission was not the same as a lie. All her SHIELD covers were burnt, laid bare for the world to see and the world wide web really did like to see things laid bare. The lingerie shots they took and planted for her Stark Industry cover were the thing the world seemed most fascinated with after that the contract killings and the red room apparently seemed too dull.

But any spy worth her salt had covers separate from her job. Paranoia was not just an occupational hazard but in its way a blessing. Clint had his own, though he would swear black and blue he was just a solider not a spy. Clint was a talker, a story teller, and when he got bored you learned why he squirreled away money and identification. He told her of CIA programs with names like fairy tales shut down in the middle of the night and agents disappeared because bigger secrets must be kept for the sake of the nation. Natasha remembered how bigger secrets were kept by little girls for another nation and she remembered that the bigger the ideals the faster you vanished.

In a lockbox in a small town in the middle of nowhere in particular Natasha becomes Naomi Sonya Robert born 1985 in Boone, North Carolina.

Her phone rings at 2:06am. Two people have this number, Maria Hill who saved her life and Captain Steve Rogers who trusts her to save his. She answers despite not recognizing the number. It is the type of phone you dial with a burner phone.

“Agent Romanoff,” says a familiar voice that speaks of smirking despite the miles.

“Mr Stark. Who gave you this number?” she asks walking through the kitchen and procuring a glass of water.

“Now isn’t that something you should already know?”

“Spy, Mr Stark, not psychic.” She allows her voice to ooze the kind of deadpan boredom he expects.

“Hill works for me now."

“I am sure it is a very enjoyable experience for her,” Natasha says rolling her eyes. There is a kind of pride Tony Stark uses to speak of hiring Maria Hill that sounds as if he thinks he has earned a victory over Nick Fury. Despite the narcissism and the 2 am phone call Natasha finds she does not want to take the petty victory from him, even if it is only a delusion.

“The benefits packages are immense.” Of this she has no doubt. Outside the kitchen window the night is squid ink in its flat blackness and she is certain that there is a mouse gnawing on the carpet in
the next room.

“If that will be all?”

“I wanted to know if you wanted your old job back?”

“In legal or as an executive assistant?” she asks facetiously.

“Either or,” he answers in a tone that suggests he is working on at least another three tasks while he speaks to her. The idea, of course, is ridiculous. Her skill set is impressive and unusual. She can play at being Natalie Rushman from Legal but she is and always will be multitudes hidden in the skin of, well, apparently now a lingerie model in Japan. She has more important things to do than play pretend with Tony Stark. No matter what Maria Hill's end game may be.

“No thank you, Mr Stark,” she says firmly and somewhere in New York he speaks like this was never his plan. Sometimes you get flashes, flashes of what really lies beneath the outrageously loud, attention seeking behavior of Tony Stark, you get flashes of his genius.

“One final offer on the table then, how about as an Avenger?”

They were not meant to be Avengers. But then a mad man from outer space took what was hers and set them on a path to... all of this. If she had not been on the ground that day, if some of that red had not come away from her ledger with the blood of the Chitauri, she has no doubt she would be currently making escape plans from a high security military prison.

“The Avengers Initiative cannot exist without SHIELD,” she says.

“I plan on proving you wrong on that one.”

“I wish you luck then.” She believes they are done. She has her own work to do and that does not include the Avengers. She will not go without him.

“You know anything about a Sokovia?” Tony asks instead of disconnecting.

“Former Soviet State, used as a battlefield by various factions since the last regime change. Little natural resources but a location with high strategic value. Small but significant Roma population...” she lists allowing the question to remain in her voice.

“Thought you might like to know it’s where we’ve tracked the little bird to.” The air in the old kitchen stills, she imagines she can see specks of dust in the flow of illumination from the pantry’s light stop and wait for her to ask for confirmation.

“Barton?” she says evenly.

“The archer himself. Fury buried him deep.” She could not find him with her limited resources. She came here to search and wait. She refused to believe he was dead, refused to consider it. In all of the documents uploaded and displayed, a hole formed around a man named Clinton Francis Barton. Around the hole she has placed postcards on a map and looked for signs in tea cups.

“That is... useful information.”

“In this instance,” Stark continues, “he happens to be embedded right in the middle of something avengery. Our giant demigod friend can explain all when you get here.

“When I get there, Mr Stark?” she asked bemused by his confidence.
“You know, I think you can call me Iron Man… or Boss. JARVIS arrange to have the Quinjet collect Romanoff.”

The call disconnects.

She is packed and ready to leave in less than thirty minutes. She cuts her hair in a small bathroom on the lower floor, flushing the red curls down the toilet for disposal. She places a small silver arrow necklace behind a loose brick in the wall of an old farm house in Waverly, Iowa and waits.
A clock tower is the worst place to hide out, he decides ruefully. The nights were long and cold and
did that nothing to aid his mood after his contact had revealed herself to be a murdering Nazi bastard.
Natasha would laugh but for an assassin he actually hated the killing. He had quite enjoyed ending
Braubach though. The way she went on and on about the glory of fucking Hydra, exhausting to
listen to, he’d have preferred it if she’d decided to pull his nails out one by one. She didn’t get an
arrow through the neck, didn’t deserve an arrow through the neck, in the end he’d just snapped it
when she’d refused to stay down.

The fact that he was still here meant she hadn’t got word to Von Struker and his lot.

The safe house or rather safe, tiny, soviet built apartment in the heart of the capital was compromised
and Braubach was the one who spoke Sokovian. His Russian could get him by for a time, the
languages were related, unlike the neighboring Transian and Romanian, and most of the older
generation spoke it but he would reveal himself to be an American the second he opened his mouth.
He supplemented his MRE’s with stuff he could palm from the busier markets and kept his head
down.

He needed to get the fuck out of Sokovia, back across the border into Transia and then into
Romania, he had resources in Bucharest he could tap if he had enough distance between him and the
three Hydra bases he’d cased, to hop a flight back to the states.

He could, maybe, blend in with the Roma travelers who flowed across the borders as if nation states
were hedge rows and they were foxes and rabbits. The problem was they were so close knit, cultures
so specific and exclusionary that they would know he wasn’t one of them in a fraction of a second.
In the pro column they hated Hydra, weren’t fond of the Sokovian government or any government
for that matter and the traveling in caravans thing wasn’t exactly new to him. In the cons, no one in
Sokovia seemed to like Avengers.

The regular riots in the capital were doing him no favors.

He’d re-conned three Hydra bases in all, one in Bulgaria in the north near the black sea, one in
Transia just over the Romanian border far enough outside the major city and then this one in
Sokovia. Chasing down the rumors Fury had heard of rogue SHIELD human experimentation and
twin survivors.

He’d found them after the fall and the reveal that it wasn’t so much SHIELD experimentation as
Captain America’s old enemies. He couldn’t do anything to help them at the moment and he wasn’t
even sure they wanted to be helped. Braubach, at least, had been convinced that they’d volunteered
for the experiments. For the glory of Hydra, blah blah, shut the fuck up, blah. He wasn’t so sure.
He’d seen kids so screwed up they were convinced they wanted some fuckin’ awful vomit inducing
things in his time. He’d done his best to get them out even when they’d fought him tooth and nail.
Natasha was always better at those sort of mission, surprisingly so if you thought about it, but she
knew just how to say ‘it wasn’t your fault’ and still get them to leave a hell hole in a timely manner.
These kids weren’t so much kids anymore but they were, as far as he could tell, orphans and he
knew a thing or two about orphans being a little stuck at the moment they all of a sudden had to
grow up. But mostly he wasn’t gonna take Braubach’s word on anything. Fuckin’ Braubach.
His route here had been deliberately confused by direct order. No one knew he was here or what his exact mission was. He’d crossed over the border two weeks back, traveling at night through the snow and avoiding the howls of a wolf pack in the mountains. He’d hoped when he got here to find his SHIELD contacts were still SHIELD. He was Clint Barton still so that had been a bust, his life was pretty much trash at this point.

Braubach told him Fury was dead. If he was the kind of person who prayed he’d have said one for Natasha but instead he broke free of the plastic ties she’d tightened around his wrists and proceeded to take his frustrations out on the turn coat. She’d really been a terrible agent, plastic zip ties? Really?

He’d left the apartment looking like a robbery gone wrong, wiped her hard drives after copying the files and shoving the tiny memory stick into the hole in his boot. He wished he’d taken beer from her fridge while he was at it.

He just wants a nap in an actual bed and a sandwich. Is that too much to ask?

He just wants to see Natasha again.

Every night he still dreams he kills Natasha.

He’s stolen enough wire and cheap 9 volt batteries to mean he can rig up a Morse code oscillator with the tech he still has in his packed gear. Its range is limited and he can’t be sure there was anyone left to contact. He knows if Natasha is out there she will be looking and he wants to make sure there is something to find when she does. Five times a day he taps out his SHIELD security code and his coordinates.

After the last lot of protests in the city center, there are a group of Kalderash Romani looking like they are about to head back towards Romania. It’s a smart move, shit always travels downwards and the city officials look more and more likely to start kicking it down every day. He’ll make his move with them, hope his charm, desperation and willingness to bargain wins him a few friends among the generally persecuted travelers.

The sight lines are good from the clock tower he can see most of the city. Once and a while, he imagines he sees a flash of red hair in the mobs of Slavic blondes and Romanianesque dark heads. He can never find it again when he searches.

He collapses his bow slipping it under the blankets and slides his knife back into its leg holster. He pulls his hood back up and prepares to head out into the twilight to continue his thievery.

Chapter End Notes

So I am going to attempt to make sense out of the events of Ultron but with this Clint and this Natasha. If you loved Ultron or have yet to see it please consider not continuing with this story. Comments will be rewarded. My understanding of Romani culture is rudimentary at best so if you see anything I have written as offensive or questionable please don't hesitate to let me know and to educate me (that goes for anything else I've written too). Thank you once again for continuing to read, you are all so wonderful.
It has its pros

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Maria,” she greets the dark haired woman as she exits the quinjet. Maria is holding several Stark issued pads and indicates to an intern looking twenty something to her left to collect Natasha’s belongings.

“Natasha, good flight?”

“Oh yes,” Natasha says smiling easily, “didn’t even have to pay for the headphones.” Her mind has been racing the entire flight despite the knowledge she could do nothing until she was at Stark’s Tower. It was Avengers Tower now. The huge STARK that adorned the facade quickly demolished in Loki’s attack. Stark and most probably Potts had seen the virtue and publicity in leaving the final A to signify Avengers. Heal, New York, it instructed, but heal around the Avengers.

“Really?” Maria says looking up from a Pad, “I’ll have to tell Ms Potts there’s an untapped revenue source.” Her voice is dry and it is refreshing to be around the kind of ironic disdain that SHIELD seemed to foster in its agents, again.

“Stark Industries suits you well?” she asks.

“It has its pros,” Maria walks them away from the landing bay and through glass and iron sliding doors.

“I remember.”

“And then there are the cons,” Maria adds.

“Where is Mr Stark?” Natasha asks lightly. You would need to pay close attention to the conversation to decode the levels of snark and information that underpin it. Natasha slips back into the flow of it with ease.

“In the lab with Dr Banner,” Maria says directing them to an elevator. She is wearing the exact shade of blue that her SHIELD uniform was. Natasha wonders if that is for her own benefit or for Stark’s. Does Maria feel safer or more herself in SHIELD blue or is she subtly trying to remind Tony Stark of her true loyalties and abilities. Clint would snort and tell her that maybe it’s ‘cause Maria looks good in blue. He would say that and then look for the pattern anyway, her hyper-vigilance was not unshared.

“Dr Banner decided to stay then?”

“It has its pros,” Maria says with practiced nonchalance. They glide through several floors. More glass and iron.

“He seemed rather keen to return to anonymity when last I saw him,” Natasha adds. The man she’d collected from Calcutta did not seem willing to be around this ‘time bomb’ as he had put it so succinctly, longer than was absolutely necessary. She had to agree with his sentiment, if you were dangerous you owed it to the world to limit the danger you could inflict. The hulk was dangerous and uncontrolled, it was something only she and Banner seemed willing to acknowledge.

“When Hydra almost executes you from the sky,” Maria shrugs slightly, “anonymity appears to take
a back seat to safety.” Natasha notes that she names the menace Hydra and not SHIELD. Maria herself seems to agree that Stark Industries is a safe house after the fall of SHIELD. Natasha wonders if she will get a chance to determine if it is a Fury directive or a need to avoid the endless congressional hearings and intelligence organizations with grudges that has led the commander here.

“Safety?” Natasha raises an eyebrow, “In the vicinity of Tony Stark.”

“It’s questionable,” Maria agrees before returning to her Pad and asking too lightly, “Iowa?”

“Needed a place to lay low.”

“Barton’s from Iowa,” Maria says coolly. Barton is from everywhere. He happened to be born in Iowa but like Army brats, circus kids grow up everywhere.

“He’s in Sokovia?” Natasha says by way of an answer.

Maria produces a small closed lipped smile and shakes her head almost imperceptibly before she begins her debrief. “From what I can determine. Fury kept him out of the SHIELD files. Sokovia was where he was ultimately headed.” She brings up several sets of blurry and confused satellite surveillance images, scrolling through them for Natasha’s benefit as she speaks. “Three bases thought to be Hydra, Bulgaria, Transia and Sokovia. I can place him at the other two bases prior to SHIELD’s demise.”

“Any proof he’s in Sokovia?”

“He hasn’t made contact,” Maria says bluntly. Natasha is grateful, Maria Hill has never been one to sugar coat her assessments and it has always made it easier to quickly determine the odds of success and survival.

“Not surprising,” Natasha says frowning slightly at the scant intel Maria presents on the Pad as the elevator comes to a stop.

“You’ve had no contact?”

“No,” she confirms as they exit the elevator, “The circle was kept small.”

“It wasn’t my choice.” To Hill’s credit she does not look apologetic, she has always done her duty and Natasha has found her to be calming in her predictability.

“Now I know where to look.”

“We’ve searched using all the usual methods,” Maria says tilting her head slightly.

“I’ll use… unusual ones,” Natasha allows, “Mr Stark said the Avengers were required.”

“I’ll let the Captain brief you.”

“And Thor?”

“Oh yes, Thor is here.” Maria smiles openly, “With his arms.”

“They are hard to miss,” Natasha agrees. There was running jokes throughout SHIELD, in the short time after Thor’s arrival on the Helicarrier, about the demigod and his arms. Natasha suspects Maria Hill in its inception and the way it was often used to take egocentric male agents down a peg or two.

Maria Hill slides a security pass across a small scanner before pressing her thumb to it. The door
swings open with the tell-tale gust of positive air pressure.

The lab is the same glass and iron creation as the rest of the rebuilt tower even the floors are glazed and Natasha makes a note never to wear a loose skirt. Glass screens are pulled and retracted out into the room with detailed computer code and data analysis super imposed on them. Tony Stark grabs a strip of luminous white data from the air in front of him, scrunches it and aims the ball at a floating trash can symbol above Doctor Banners concerned head.

“Romanoff, glad you could make it,” he says, pointing at her distractedly as he speaks.

“Natasha,” Doctor Banner says smiling apologetically, the man’s body language is an exercise in trying to excuse your own existence, “Nice to see you again.”

“Mr Stark, Dr Banner.”

“Captain Rogers and Mr Odinson will be down shortly,” Maria says, nodding professionally before exiting through the glass doors.

“See Hill likes it here,” Stark says, “I don’t know why you insisted on making it so hard.”

Banner winces at this, “Not everyone needs to join your club house, Tony.”

“Thank you, Dr Banner,” Natasha says and smiles in a way she hopes will calm Doctor Banner.

“Bruce, please,” he says, returning her smile, “You’ve seen me turn big and green, formalities after that, eh,” he pushes his glasses back up his nose self-consciously.

“Bruce.”

“You still have to call me Boss,” Stark says, sliding more holographic displays out of his way.

“Ignore him,” Bruce says tiredly.

“I generally do.” She widens her stance and relaxes into it.

“Just for that you don’t get any of the cool toys I’ve made,” Stark says.

“Toys?”

“Oh yes,” a familiar voice comes from the opening doors behind her, “Stark’s big on making everything ‘cooler’” She can hear the way the Captain inserts inverted commas around the word cooler as though it was a 21st century fascination he still couldn’t wrap his head around.

“Captain.”

“Natasha,” he says reaching out for her hand. She offers it and he shakes it formally before grinning agreeably. “You’re well I hope?” Behind him is Thor, with his arms. They cannot be disregarded despite the fact that he has somehow managed to find shirts that will encase them. From what she knows of Dr Foster she does not seem the type to willingly consider clothes or attempt to dress her ‘man’ so Natasha can’t help but wonder if the Thunder God and Stark have shared tailors in her absence. It is a thought at amuses her.

“Thank you, yes.”

“Lady Natasha,” Thor declares boisterously, “I am glad of your assistance.” He scans the room smiling at each of the congregation before slapping Steve on the back with a large hand. Steve rocks
forward with the unexpected force and grins again at Natasha.

“Thor,” she nods, biting back the smile she has for being called a Lady, “I’m not certain what it is you require.”

“You have not been told of what befell Loki’s scepter?” Thor declares, his brow furrowing.

“The scepter?” She looks to Steve for an explanation.

“It looks like it’s in the hands of Hydra,” he answers her immediately.

“That is…”

“Potentially catastrophic,” Stark announces flicking through images of the scepter from the last time it was in their control. “What with the twisty mind control feature and all.”

“The scepter has many powers,” Thor nods his large arms folded across his chest, “We do not yet know the impact it may have upon this world.” More powers than the ones that turned Clint’s eyes to ice and his brain to Loki’s control?

“We think we know where it is,” Steve says scrutinizing her reaction, “We could mount an attack but I’d like more recon going in. Hill has evidence it’s with a Hydra and former SHIELD operative by the name of Von Strucker.”

“Baron Von Strucker!” Tony says gesturing at Natasha and Rogers in a sweeping hand movement, “And you guys didn’t know he was evil. Seriously?! Does the guy have to go by Dr Claw or point a big neon sign saying ‘Cartoon Villain’ at his head before SHIELD…”

Natasha exhales, gripping her left wrist with her right hand. Beside her Steve shakes his head slightly, his blue eyes becoming harder. If he doesn’t understand Stark’s references he doesn’t say instead slipping efficiently into his leadership role he cuts Stark’s rant off.

“Stark, we deal with the problem in front of us.” He turns back to Natasha, “If Barton is in Sokovia do you think you can find him?”

“If Barton is alive,” Barton is alive, “I can bring him in,” she answers firmly.

“Good. Good,” Thor says unfolding his arms, “With the Archer added to our band we cannot fail. Heimdall knows with so many mighty warriors by my side we will return the scepter to the protection of Asgard and Midgard will once again be safe.”

Banner’s smile has turned incredulous though he attempts to hide in behind his hand.

“Heimdall?” she asks Steve dropping her voice lower, turning her back to Stark and Banner as she does.

“I think it’s an expression like God knows.” Steve’s voice falls back into the uncertain man out of time she calls her friend.

“Ah, must be hard to blaspheme when you are technically a God,” she says as he shrugs.

“Everyone out!” Stark orders. “I have stuff to make ‘cooler’” he says pointedly at Rogers, illustrating that he knows the Captain’s disdain for the concept, “and exposition bores me. Bruce can stay.”

“And if Bruce doesn’t want to stay?” Dr Banner asks screwing up his nose with a look of hopelessness.
“You wound me Banner, you wound me.”

Chapter End Notes

The continuing prologue to Age of Ultron (with the Bruce/Nat shipping taken out and Black Hawk put back in)
If you comment and you want a prize just email me at wildechilde1979@gmail.com. If you have questions I will answer them, if you have knowledge I will tap that. Keep being awesome and thanks for reading.
He shoves his gear back into the black back pack, pulling the rain protective cover from the base and slipping it over in an effort to stop the endless damp from getting to his tech. It won’t work, of course, but he has to try. He climbs down through the trap door and out into the street below. The sun has set and the streets of the capital are populated by furtive looking strays navigating their ways home through the bombed out gravel piles.

“Ты сегодня свободен?” a clear high Russian voice calls out, it’s less guttural than the native Sokovian. He ignores the call, weaving further down the street heading towards the remains of the medieval town wall and the Roma beyond. “дай сходим куда-нибудь!” The young lady calls again not apparently deterred by his disinterest. She is following, along the edge of the clock tower’s wall.

“Меня это не интересует,” he says gruffly.

“это смешно,” she says and giggles. This is just what he needs, some Russian girl looking for a john for the night, following him down the street and making sure he’s super visible. He stops and rounds on the girl, her hair covered by a dark scarf and her slim body hidden in a coat two sizes too big. It’s an odd look for a girl wanting to sell herself for the night but then again it’s cold and he really couldn't give two fucks.

“ты красавица,” he says not really looking at her his gaze flicking back to the street and each Sokovian that passes, “Меня это не интересует,” he repeats firmly. She must have him pegged as a Russian but now he’s said more than three words she’s gonna know he’s not a native. If he can get her off his back, he can get lost before the rumors travel back to the city officials or Hydra.

“Ты мой герой,” the girl’s voice lowers as she says the odd non sequitur. He steps closer to the girl, moving into the shadows as she moves closer to the wall.

“Listen girly girl,” he growls, switching to English because if anything is true it’s that Natasha says his Russian sounds like he is actively trying to sound like an American tourist and Sokovia ain’t no place for tourists. “I ain’t your hero, but if I was I’d say you need a new line of work.”

The girl sucks in air audibly and he thinks she’s about to scream and then, “A new line of work?” the girl says softly but it’s not the girl’s voice. He’d know that voice anywhere, he’d follow that voice anywhere. “How about you join me Hawkeye? We could be heroes together.”

“Natasha!”

“In the end I don’t think I needed the Morse code, of course you were in a fucking clock tower.”

“You’re here?! Tasha!” He pins her to the wall, examining every inch of her face cupped in his hands.

“Glad I went with the street walker ploy,” she says her lips curving into a smile. He could kiss that smile. In fact he does. She is soft and warm and his fingertips find their way beneath the scarf she’s used to cover her very recognizable red hair.

When he pulls back she loops her hands around his waist pulling his hips towards her as she still

“да,” he echoes before shaking himself free of the elation of seeing her again. “да, иди сюда!” he says more certainly, taking her hand and pretending to drag her down the street.

When they turn the corner Natasha once again takes the lead. She manoeuvres down back streets towards the old town wall and the woods beyond. When people pass she giggles girlishly and turns into him making a show of public affection. He obliges gropping her in large pantomime movements. He wants nothing more than to speak to her, hold her comfortably against him and remember what it is to have a best friend. The night and their escape necessitates a different kind of behavior and he ignores his desires the best he can.

She doesn’t speak until they exit the city. Beyond the remains of the old city wall it is dark and the sparse scrub quickly turns into European woods. She lets go of his hand then, turning before inhaling deeply like she is cleansing herself of a persona. Her face changes suddenly becomes more Natasha as she removes the head scarf. Her red hair is short and wild. “Ready to be heroes?” she asks.

“Uh?” he asks articulately in return.

“I may have signed us up with an initiative.”

“Initiative?” he repeats dropping his back pack from his shoulder, “Avengers Initiative? Surely with no SHIELD?” She waits impassively while he figures it out. “Right, Stark?”

“Stark, Rogers, Banner and Thor,” she says and he chuckles.

“So he got the band back together?” There is so much he should be asking. What the fuck happened with SHIELD seems to be at the forefront of the list. He’s been able to piece together some information from TVs in bodegas with her perfect Black Widow in front of sneering Congressmen dubbed into languages he only knew how to swear in. And from internet cafes in seedy places near borders but staying online for too long examining the huge information dump was sure to ping someone’s data mining algorithm. Ultimately, it wasn’t something he needed to know to stay alive. What he wanted to know was if she was okay. The way she looks at him now he is almost certain he isn’t allowed to ask.

“He provided the quinjet to bring you home.”

“Not that I’m not grateful,” he says, scratching at the months of growth that now covers his chin. She’s giving him the look that says, ‘and what was your plan Hawkeye? Buy a boat and row home?’

“We’re no heroes?” She shakes her head as she speaks and he wonders if she’s even aware she is doing it.

“I’m a… carnie, a soldier…” he says, “I’m an agent.” Not even that anymore, he supposes, and I was only ever that because Fury gave me sixth and seventh chances. Now he’s just Barton and he remembers enough of the just Bartons to know how well they fair in this world.

“That’s what you did,” she says coming closer.

“Nat…” he says because despite how much he wants to grab her, cling to her and love her, right now, this is business. “They need you. You’re you… amazing,” he says drawing himself upright and giving it one last shot at being the Agent Fury and Coulson thought he could be. “They don’t need a two bit archer…”
She frowns and he just smiles in return, “I thought I’d get a bit longer.”

“Longer?”

“Yeah.”

“When the world wasn’t ending,” she seems to agree.

“Yeah. It would be nice for a change.”

“They need you, Clint,” she says sounding firm and husky, a voice he knows as Natasha and truth and home.

“Yeah?” He smiles lopsidedly in the dark, reaching out for her hands. He finds her left hand circled around her right wrist. “What? They’ve got a hole to plug and only an arrow will fit?”

“Von Strucker has Loki’s Scepter.”

“Of course he does,” he says laughing bitterly through the chill of it. “And that explains the wonder twins.” Natasha raises an eyebrow in the gloom. He could explain but he knows they have no time. It isn’t safe here. It won’t be safe until they are… it’s never going to be safe.

He opens his back pack in silence, pulling his collapsible bow from its sheath and five arrows in a quiver he can fix to his back.

When he looks back up at her to hand her the back pack she says, “This is my better way.”

“Yeah,” he nods, “Figured as much.” He smooths down the fletchings on each arrow before tossing them back into the quiver.

“It’s a thirty minute hike back to the jet.”

“So I have thirty minutes to pretend it’s just me and you,” he sighs, already wishing he could spend those thirty minutes kissing her and memorizing how alive she is instead of hiking.

“Why pretend?” she asks moving closer still.

“Because we get back there and …” he shrugs then snaps the bow in his left hand out to extension, “We go back to work.”

“We?” she says and if she was play acting he knows there would be childlike hope in the question but she is Natasha now and Natasha doesn’t hope she calculates odds and she survives.

“Yeah. This is your better way,” he says, “They might not need me but I sure as hell need you. Consider me signed up.”

“ты мой герой,” she says too happily for it to be real and yet certainly covering for anything true she does feel.

“Yeah, yeah,” he says, adjusting the straps of the back pack on her shoulders, “We both know you don’t need a damn hero.”

Chapter End Notes
Trans gloss
“ты сегодня свободен?” - Are you free tonight?
“давай сходим куда-нибудь!” - let’s go somewhere!
“Меня это не интересует,” - I'm not interested
“это смешно,” - That's funny
“ты красивая девушка,” - You're a pretty girl “Меня это не интересует,” I'm not interested
“ты мой герой,” - You're my hero.
“да?” - Yes?
“да, иди сюда!” - Yes, Come!
“ты мой герой,” - You're my hero.

Thank you for continuing to read. All comments are individually hugged and watered. You guys are of course the best of peoples.
In the illumination of the cabin during pre-flight checks she gets a better look at him than the Sokovian street had allowed. Beneath the black knit cap his right eye is contoured with the greens and yellows of healing bruising, his knuckles on both hands have scabbed over and there is the fresh pink seam under his chin overlaying his jugular, fine and clean enough to say knife to anyone familiar with such things.

His chin is covered in the blonde fuzz he laughingly calls a beard and she mocks ruthlessly, survive a Russian winter with that, she’d say until he’d stop being lazy and shave it. She doesn’t feel like mocking the beard today.

They argue about who will fly because they always argue about who will fly but it is clear to Natasha that Clint has been surviving on four hours of disjointed unimpressive sleep each night and she wins the argument.

“Hey! You wanted to fly this bird, do your checks and stop giving me the field medics once over,” he snaps tiredly when she looks back over her shoulder between checks.

“I can multitask.”

“You want a back seat pilot?” he says, dragging the cap off his head, “ ‘Cause that’s what you’re askin’ for Romanoff.”


He pulls the quiver from his back and begins to unlace his boots. The fingers on his right hand are stiff as he pulls apart the old leather, he has more dexterity with his left hand but drawing his bow can’t have been fun in the last two weeks. When his boots are sufficiently loosened he scrubs at the lank, brown looking hair on his head and sighs.


“Who’d you break your fists on?” she asks.

“They’re just a little scuffed up,” he says climbing up to the cockpit to talk to her, “Don’t know if you heard but SHIELD had a bit of a Hydra problem.”

She smiles at his reflection in the darkened cockpit window, “May have heard a little something about that.”

“So,” he says dryly, his hand resting on the back of her seat a worn leather cuff around its wrist, “I found myself up a certain creek without even a Captain America to my name.”

She smiles more broadly as she turns in her seat. “He’s surprisingly more dead weight than you would have wanted to carry.”
Natasha refuses to think about hypothetical worlds, pasts undone and debts never incurred but a fleeting thought of a Clint and a Steve on the run trying to use the physical affection diversion flickers in her mind. She allows it to pass without comment.

In the end, she was in DC with Rogers and he was crisscrossing Eastern Europe. Decisions were made and no good could come of imagining they could be unmade.

She rolls her shoulders back and takes a breath to start on the next sequence of pre-flight checks. She knows even when she looks down at the console he is watching. Too long ago now for it to be of any use but a debt unpaid, she looked up and saw him watching. He watches like he is nothing but a pair of patient blue eyes in a sea of things to be examined. He watches as though he could make her look at him. If it was helpful to wonder, she might wonder if he did make her look up once, find him waiting on a rooftop and send her life careening down this path, if it was helpful to wonder.

She looks back at him.

“You made a good call,” he says. It is unnaturally reassuring.

“The same one you would have made?”

“I hope so,” he answers, giving her a lopsided smile.

“Clint,” she begins, despite the fact that her mouth is full of the waxy shredded nuts of words about debt and secrets not hers to tell but told anyway. She knows he is not one to deal in score cards that his trust is given suicidally freely.

“Tash,” he says as if seeing the oncoming untranslatable slam of reasons and apologies, “let’s just get the fuck out of here. Braubach had a regular check in and she’s missed her second one tonight.” He shakes his head as he pushes the flats of his hands into the ceiling of the cockpit, “Scums gonna come lookin’ sharpish for whoever killed her. My questions can wait. Just glad I’m not in the back of some crappy RV sneaking across the border with the Roma.”

“So your plan wasn’t just to hope Natasha rescues you?”

He chuckles at this and then almost to himself he says, “Pretty certain that’s been my plan since day one.”


Half an hour into the flight the stealth jet is flying quietly through a moonless night. They have hours yet to fly.

“JARVIS take over.”

“Of course Ms Romanoff,” JARVIS responds automatically.

In the cabin, he is slumped in his seat the four point harness the only thing keeping him upright. His head is twisted to rest on his left shoulder giving him the appearance of a double chin beneath the ratty beard.

“Clint?” she says as she approaches.

“Mmm, yep, I’m up,” he answers, rolling his head back but entirely failing to open his eyes.
“No, you’re not.”

“Yeah. I’m not,” he yawns largely, “But I will be.”

When he rolls his head back towards her, opening his eyes, she asks “Do you still have the dreams?”

“Tasha.”

“That’s a yes.”

“It’s not so bad,” he argues and winces when he sees her expression, “Or it won’t be. You’re alive. You’re here.”

“I’m not a solution,” she says because the only solution she has ever been has been a final one.

“I know Natasha,” he says tiredly and she finds herself unable to look at him any longer, “Hey, I know that.” He reaches out, a bruised knuckle pushed under her chin to turn her back towards him, “I’m workin’ on it. Things just got busy.”

“Things are still busy,” she says her lips a firm line, “You’ll need to brief Rogers and Hill when we get back.”

“Hill?”

“Stark is happy with his new hire.”

“And you?” he frowns.

“She saved us… Rogers, Wilson…” Maria Hill and Fury saved them all. Had she known perhaps she might not have needed saving but these thoughts are never helpful. Maria Hill is an asset. Maria Hill could be trusted even when she could not. Whatever reasons brought her to Stark Industries, Natasha will continue to allow her to be useful. Use is valuable, anger is valuable, revenge and hurt are not.

“Wilson?” Clint echoes, “Do I know a Wilson?”

“Perhaps after you’ve slept?”

“I was kinda hoping for at least a sandwich,” he grins dopily.

“A sandwich?”

“Or Pizza,” he nods, “Pizza would be good.”

“Is food all you’ve thought about?”

“No. That would be staying alive and you, in no particular order.” She takes his hand turning it over in her own, examining the slight swelling across the fourth and fifth metacarpal bones and brushing her thumb across the roughened surface of his knuckles. She lifts the hand to her lips pressing the lightest of kisses to his first curled knuckle. He watches her intently. He does not say a word.

“You’ve been jumping through windows,” she says softly.

“And I told you not to break DC,” he says matching her tone, “We lie.”

Врёты -- и глазом не мигнет. KGB for Hydra. Liars and Killers. His hand drops from her grasp. She can’t look at him. The cabin swings before her eyes for a moment and she frowns in an effort to
stabilize it.

“Hey, what was that, Natasha? You know I’m joking?” he is saying beside her, “Dammit. Don’t go all quiet on me. I just got you back.”

“You should sleep,” her voice sounds flat even to her own ears, “I’ll tell JARVIS to have a sandwich for you.” She stands up. Her head is roaring. Why is it roaring? He unbuckles himself battered fingers doing their best to unclasp and follow her. Even as he stands reaching out for her as she takes a step backwards and then another she focuses on those fingers, large knuckles, browned skin, finger nails rimmed in dirt.

“Tasha.”

“Clint. Sleep,” she insists professionally as she climbs back into her seat, “You’re no good to us if you haven’t slept.”

“Fuckin’ perfect Barton,” he is muttering angrily to himself, “What’s your encore? Well, Clint I thought I’d set myself on fire,” In the reflection in the cockpit window she can see him throw his hands up before turning to strap himself back into his seat, “Brilliant, you should do that. Save us all some time,” he finishes dejectedly.

Chapter End Notes

Врёт -- и глазом не мигнёт.
Trans gloss - He lies and does not blush
Trans Lit- Lying - and no eye blinks.
If you would like to hear the words click on the link at the start of the saying and hear google translate say it for you. It's like a DVD extra
They were speaking as if a code green was no more serious than a flash bang. The holographic display of the castle and its fortifications hovers six inches off the table and spins as Rogers turns it with a finger to indicate a bunker that will need to be neutralized. Clint is behind her, perched on the mezzanine watching the display from what little distance he could get. She folds her arms over her chest.

“Dr Banner?” she says not looking at the weary doctor as she speaks, “Are you certain that’s a good idea, Captain?”

If it was possible to do so Rogers’ jaw becomes firmer set before Banner speaks up, “I have some control over… We’ve been working on it.” His hands are wedged into the pockets of his lab coat forcing his shoulders to hunch, it is not the body language of a man confident in his response.

“Bruce and I have been working on a little something,” Stark says strutting around the table to put his hand on the doctor’s shoulder, “We can get him back when we need too.”

“Huh?” Clint says from above the frown on his face shifting little, “Like what? A crate full of puppies?”

“More scientific than that, Bird Boy,” Stark shoots back annoyed. Dr Banner winces beneath Stark’s grip and Natasha can see that Stark’s hand has tightened reflexively on Banner’s shoulder in response to Clint’s flippant comment.

“A little more,” Banner offers with a tilt of his head. Natasha wonders if Clint will interrupt again drawing attention to the fact that his call sign is a reference to The last of the Mohicans and not the actual bird but thankfully he falls back into silence perhaps as unsure of the lay of the land as she feels.

“Are you certain this ‘Lullaby’ protocol will work, Dr Banner?” The Captain asks, perhaps as uneasy at the Doctor’s reassurances as Natasha.

“It’s worked in the controlled trials,” Banner says, stepping out from under Stark’s grip, “The other guy, he trusts Tony, likes Tony even. The pressure points and the trigger words have been effective so far.” There is something a little manic in Stark’s smile but Banner lays out the plan in a detached manner.

Natasha is not entirely swayed, “A raid is not a controlled environment and adding another uncontrolled element to that is…”

“‘Tasha,” Clint says softly behind her perhaps not loud enough for the others to hear, it is meant to be a warning, a request for her to stand down and it annoys her as soon as it leaves his lips.

Rogers shakes his head firmly, using his hand to spin the plans again. “The plans Barton brought back show sentry towers here, here and here, bunkers here and here and a full complement of trained soldiers not to mention any enhancements made by the Scepter.”

“I concur,” Thor says, his face illuminated by the glow of the schematics, “even with the might of each member of our band the Hulk will be needed.” He takes in each person as he speaks turning his
princely countenance upon each of them in a manner that could only be taught from birth.

“Natasha?” Steve says turning to her.

“If that’s your decision.” She nods sharply.

“It is. The aim is to reclaim the scepter and arrest Von Strucker. Keep casualties to a minimum.”

“I want his records. See what he’s been working on,” Stark adds pushing up the sleeves of his shirt and picking up a screw driver, tossing it once and catching it in the same hand.

“It’s secondary,” Rogers says, nevertheless he nods, “but Hill will want to augment what Barton brought back with him. Take what you can get.”

“Arrest Von Strucker?” Clint says wryly, “Without SHIELD around whose gonna fund the trial and store the bastard?”

“NATO’s willing to take over. We all clear?” Rogers asks as each Avenger nods, “Good. We leave at 16 hundred hours.”

The image of the castle and surrounding snow covered woods flickers and vanishes. Bruce smiles wanly at her before turning back to a computer screen. Stark has already turned from the group peppering JARVIS with questions the AI has no time to answer. Natasha hears the thump as Clint’s feet hit the floor. She walks to the exit, slipping the Stark Industries key card from her pocket.

“Natasha,” Clint calls, “Wait up.”

“Barton,” Stark calls from behind him. Clint frowns for an instant before smoothing his face into a pleasant enough smile.

“In the last two days they have not spoken. He needed medical and sleep, Rogers and Hill needed to debrief. She needed space. She needed parallel bars. Stark does not have parallel bars. His rooms are below hers and she does not think about the ways he kills her in his dreams.

“The AI said lurking?” he says, his forehead creasing.
“Clint?”

“I wanted to talk to you. Make sure we’re okay,” he gestures between them and then rubs his knuckles under his nose. His hands are covered by fingerless gloves. “Find out what the hell happened with SHIELD and…”

“Hill and Rogers debriefed you.” He has shaved leaving a smattering of stubble along his chin and top lip, the blond brown of it a contrast to Stark’s well curated goatee. His clothes are mostly new, whatever he did have lost in the fall of SHIELD though she’d done her best to salvage some things from his apartment in Bed Stuy after the dust had settled. He is wearing a dark jacket over a checked shirt. He is cold despite the consistent temperature of the tower.

“Yeah, I got the official play by play.” The bruising has faded around his eye. “I want to know what happened to you.”

She feels her eyes open a little wider, “Nothing.”

“Right Tasha,” he says suddenly closer, he raises his eyebrows, “I know that’s bullshit.”

“Nothing happened.”

He shakes his head and sighs disbelievingly. “I brought you into this mess. You pissed at me for that?”

“I made my own choices,” she says stepping back into the doorway.

“You can be pissed at me. Hell, I’m pissed at me,” he says throwing his hands up in front of him before bringing them down hard into his hair.

“No.”

“I should have been here.” He leans forward and then rests an arm on her door frame to support his weight, he stops searching her face, his eyes switching focus to a distance well and truly beyond the faun colored wall in front of him, “I should have…”

“Don’t,” she says firmly and he shakes his head almost imperceptibly but enough to cut off what would follow instead she finds herself crossing her arms in front of her and saying, “Should haves will not help. We’ll fight, we’ll retrieve the scepter and take down Hydra.”

“Yeah,” he says but it sounds like anything but an agreement. His lips form a half-hearted smile but even from this angle she can see it does not reach his eyes. “Stark got the weight perfect on a couple of those experimental arrows, acid tips.” He shrugs. “Guess I’m cowboying around with you guys for now…”

He turns his head again, his eyes are swallowed up with grey, sharp grey like a battleship bulkhead or a wolf against a snow bank, “Natasha. I still have your back. I’ll always have your back.”

“I know,” she says softly. His mouth curves downwards, his eyebrows pulled together though not quite enough to cause the deep groove she recognizes as anger.

“You’re gonna start talking to me again, right?”

There is a part of her that wants to curl into him, press her head against his chest and allow his arms to hold her together, the majority, however, knows that this would be a lie, a cheat. There are questions inside her that begin with ‘why do you trust me?’ and never end. Maybe she could pull
him inside, maybe she could communicate how she feels both fragmented and crystallized in equal measure and maybe he would understand. But maybe even admitting that she feels this intangible will mean she is building an identity around him, around the pretense of heroics, around another life raft he has pushed her way.

She smiles brightly, she smiles falsely, “I never stopped.”

“Yeah, okay Nat.” He kicks his boot into the skirting board before turning to leave.

Chapter End Notes

Tony and Bruce figuring out the Lullaby and Tony being the one to perform this task is something I've seen discussed on Tumblr quite a bit of late. The best articulation I have seen was in this text post http://batmanisagatewaydrug.tumblr.com/post/118889125389/what-she-says-im-fine-what-she-means-there.
Somebody want to deal with that bunker?

It begins like this. Steve is strapping himself in next to Thor who looks enchanted by the prospect of wearing a seat belt. Neither of them, she supposes, needs the safety equipment but Steve, despite his jumping out of planes without a parachute and defying entire intelligence agencies history, is a stickler for certain kinds of rules, no feet on the dash board and seat belts on. She takes up the position opposite them leaving, as always, a space for Clint who slouches in on time but never early.

“Hey Hawkman,” Stark calls as Clint arrives pushing the Avengers issued ear piece into his left ear. Clint rolls his eyes but unexpectedly does not turn to her to share his derision.

“Hawkeye. Eye. Stark.”

“Yeah, yeah Katniss,” Stark continues, swiveling in the hyper-mobile pilot seat, “You think you can fly this bird?”

Clint shrugs as he approaches the cockpit, dropping his bow case to the floor beside her as he speaks, “No major changes from the standard Quinjet?”

“Besides being bigger and better in every way you mean?” Stark grins. Clint grins back a challenge, a soundless chuckle interrupting the beginning of his words.

“It ain’t the size of the boat, it’s the motion of the ocean.”

“Wouldn’t know, I got size and power.”

“Some might say,” Clint says shaking his head like he’s missed this kind of banter, “there’s a hell of a lot compensating going on with the hot rod red and engine power.” He flicks his long fingers over the sleek control panels and leans forward to exam the bay door switches above the pilots chair.

“Боже мой,” she exclaims just as Stark seems about to reply, “Could you save the measuring contest for after we retrieve the scepter?”

“Thank God, I could almost hear the unzipping.” She looks up to see Dr Banner strapping himself into the jump seat next to Thor, he gives her a shy but grateful smile. She nods. Unlike the rest of them he is dressed in comfortable looking loose clothing, natural fibers if she is any judge. Clint is wearing a version of his winter SHIELD suit, a long coat that echoes his tac vest’s colors with extra padding in the same places as her catsuit for the kind of hand to hand combat they expect.

“Is the hulk proportional, do you think?” Stark says ostensibly to Barton but clearly for the edification of everyone assembled.

“Mental age of a three year old, Tony,” Banner answers, removing his glasses to clean as if he finds Stark's quick fire stings a kind of white noise. “That’s your cue to feel ashamed,” he adds placing the glasses back on his nose. Natasha finds herself smirking at the unexpected rebuke.

“I can fly pretty much anything with wings,” Barton answers looking up at the Doctor with a pleased expression.

“Good,” Stark says, slapping Clint on the chest and climbing out of the pilot seat, “You’re up.”

“Right?” he answers, frowning slightly before settling himself into the new vacated seat. “Okay.”
Stark takes the seat next to her “Can’t leave the spies to conspire the whole ride.” She looks away from the dark haired man to find Steve examining her intently. She raises an eyebrow before turning back to Stark.

“You really do overestimate how interesting others find you, Stark.”

“JARVIS, ready the Iron Legion and tell Romanoff I’m exactly as interesting as I think I am,” Stark replies, a twinkle in his eye. She looks down at his right forearm and hand which is encased in that portion of his suit.

“The Iron legion are ready for launch, sir,” JARVIS responds promptly, his English accented voice filling the jet’s cabin. “I can have a dossier on your most interesting attributes prepared and awaiting Ms Romanoff’s return to Avengers Tower.”

Natasha bites back a smile at the implication that such a dossier would prove many things but perhaps it would not be in Sir’s best interests to do so. She did appreciate JARVIS’s quiet attempts to limit his inventor’s excesses.

“Thank you JARVIS, I am entirely uninterested in Mr Stark’s bedpost notches.”

“But you admit my sex life is interesting.”

Steve turns from where he has been murmuring with Thor, “I think she was suggesting the most interesting thing about you is actually the women that put up with you. Can we cut the chatter?”

“Aye Aye Captain,” Stark replies throwing a left handed mockery of a salute, Steve shrugs it off but Natasha notices the way Stark’s repulsor covered hand clenches and then forcefully reopens.

“I like this chatter,” Thor says in a voice rumbling up from his diaphragm. “On Asgard I have fought for many years beside the Warriors Three and the Lady Sif. Whenever Midgard feels too unlike my home and I long for my friends it is good to remember my new companions are likewise warriors and yet full of wit.” He smiles and Steve beside him nods with a soft but sad smile and his gaze up and to his left.

“Not a warrior,” Dr Banner says, resting his head back against the cabin wall.

“And I’m the only one full of wit,” Stark immediately interjects.

In the cockpit, Clint snorts as he pulls back on the throttle lifting the Quinjet from the landing pad.

Clint is three steps behind her, having secured the jet. She presses the power pack in her wrist lighting up her suit and electrifying her widow’s bites. She hears him snort behind her and mutter something about spies and Christmas lights. He stands back as she creeps closer and in the few seconds it takes for her to take down the two men discussing the size of one man’s girlfriend’s breasts in a pigeon of German and Sokovian, Clint takes out the guards higher up with three sequential throat shots. They fall heavily into the snow below their blind. She largely ignores Stark’s chatter in her ear piece as she and Clint claim the jeep from the guards on the outskirts of Strucker’s base.

The Captain flips his shield on to his back and gives her a little nod before kicking off the motorcycle that sits next to the jeep. He is off through the forest and snow as Thor spins his hammer in his hand like an Olympic athlete.

She starts the jeep and he takes up position in the back telling her not to drive like a New York cabbie this time. She only scowls, “Shoot quickly, ястреб,” she says, “The meter is running.” She
catches his surprised smile in the rear view mirror as he flicks open his bow and draws his first arrow.

Banner stalks ahead of them, giving them both a bemused shake of his head before he hunches and then in a run his skin shifts from pale to decidedly green, growing and extending as he moves. Natasha swallows her desire to turn the jeep around and hits the gas launching them after the infuriated hulk.

It takes all of three minutes for the not insignificant forces of Von Strucker’s Hydra base to realize they are here.

Clint keeps his balance as they careen over the slick, snow covered hill. Von Strucker’s people are persistent if not entirely sane. She could do without the blasts coming from the bunkers but she enjoys kicking a man from her side door before wrenching the wheel right.

Stark zips through the tree line dodging blasts but soon enough they reach the trenches fortified with palisades. Without a word she and Clint leap from the now useless vehicle over the fortifications and towards the armed soldiers still manning the guns.

Rogers is off, having leaped with the motorcycle in a move all too reminiscent of The Great Escape, something she wouldn’t be surprised to find he now understood the reference to. He draws as much fire away from Stark as he can leaving the two least super powered behind to subdue the remaining forces.

Up ahead the Hulk and Thor are throwing vehicles and men between them like toy blocks but she has little time to acknowledge the display of strength as she fights gracelessly scrabbling for purchase, one man pulling her from his comrade before she slams the widow’s bite into his neck.

Clint landing somewhere close to her has dashed back towards the tree line taking out men when he has a clear shot, the smooth wail of arrow fire almost completely hidden beneath the laser like blasts of the bunkers and the heavy artillery fire.

In the distance there is an odd reverberation practically metallic and echoed through her earpiece, immediately it is followed by Stark, “SHIT!”

“Language!” she hears Rogers say over the roar of his bike's engine, she spins upwards pulling a soldier down with her thighs as he adds “JARVIS what’s the view from upstairs?”

“The central building is protected by some kind of energy shield,” JARVIS answers in a calm voice, “Strucker’s technology is well beyond any of the Hydra base we’ve taken so far.”

“Loki’s scepter must be here Von Strucker couldn’t mount this defense without it.” Somewhere further ahead Thor is speaking, there is a pause in her earpiece before he adds lowly, “At long last.”

She throws the final two men down before flicking her head back, scanning the lay of the land, they are at very least out manned. More of the fire seems to be centering in on her and Clint's positions.

“At long last’s lasting a little long boys.” She shoots out the knee of a soldier manning a gun just over the rise.

“Yeah…” she hears Clint grunt and then a further blast towards his tree line, “I think we lost the element of surprise.” She lets out a small breath as he finishes.

“Wait a second!” Stark’s voice cuts in, “No one else is going to deal with the fact that Cap just said language?”
“I know!” Steve replies and then the engine sound on his end of the feed cuts out and in a heaving breath he finishes “It just slipped out.”

“Sir, the city is taking fire,” she can hear JARVIS reporting to Stark.

“Oh well, we know, Strucker isn’t going to worry about civilian casualties,” Stark replies distractedly, “Send in the Iron Legion.”

The tanks are zeroing in on their location. She hates Strucker just a little more, if such a thing were possible, because he obviously believes that she and Clint are the weak point. She looks up from her position, attempting to strategize a way to shut down the bunker on the slight hill doing much of the most irritating damage in her sector. Occasionally she catches a glimpse of Clint among the trees his black coat blending him in with the trunks of the black pines.

Over her own gunfire she hears him fall, hears the way the air leaves his body in a rush. She looks up. Clint is an acrobat, a tightrope walker, a circus freak. Clint shouldn’t fall. For a second she thinks she sees a man in a tracksuit standing over him. The image of the man is gone before she can question why a man in a tracksuit would be out here in the snow and the death. It is quiet for a heartbeat. Clint stands again and he is barely upright before a flash from the bunker takes him down.

“Clint!” she yells, she is up and running towards him before she has even analyzed a safe route.

“We have enhanced in the field,” she barely hears Steve say.

“Clint’s hit,” she shouts over the top of him. She couldn’t care less about soldiers, enhanced or otherwise.

Clint is groaning when she reaches him, trying despite his injury to get back up. His hand is still clenching his bow. The blast has torn into his right side. She ducks as she tries to apply pressure. He is muttering in among the groans that only increase as she presses.

She thinks he is apologizing but the apologetic words are lost under the sound of the bunker. She wants to tell him to shut up, to stop getting injured so she can stay angry with him for a change, even if it is for reasons that have no names. She wants to tell him he can’t bleed out because she is only here to atone, he is only here because she wants to atone and she could never atone for this. Instead she pushes down into his side and hears him slur a word Cap would be very upset about. Then she yells across the comms, “Somebody want to deal with that bunker?”

The big green blur of rage she has been skirting the entire fight suddenly storms through the bunker.

“Thank you!” she says her voice higher than usual.

“Stark, we really need to get inside,” The Captain is saying. Clint has stopped struggling beneath her grip.

“I’m closing in…” Stark replies but the comms pick up everything and she can hear him add, “JARVIS am I closing in?”

She stops listening, the gauze she has layered over Clint’s side is turning a vivid red, his skin is becoming ashy. She leans down close to the ear he hasn’t forced the earpiece into and whispers, “Don’t you die on me ястреб.” His eyes open for a moment unfocused but open and he mouths a single word, ‘Hawk.’

“Drawbridge is down, people,” Stark crows suddenly interrupting the wall of chatter through the comms.
“Clint’s hit pretty bad, guys. We’re gonna need evac.”

She’s done this before, tried to force the blood back under his skin and begged in a voice that never sounds like begging for someone to save him. She knows this place and that everything changes after it.
He is still lying in the snow, has been lying in the snow for an hour now but without warning it feels like maybe only minutes. Now there is a tarp beneath him and in front of him, on a tripod, his sniper rifle. He looks down the sight and takes another breath before launching into a repeat of the song he’s been singing. This time when he goes to begin the off key rendition, his mouth shaping, ‘In Europe and America, there’s a growing feeling of hysteria,’ something else takes their place.

“He said: I have seen the others,” he sings, “and I have discovered, that this fight is not worth fighting.” It’s not the right song.

Through the cross hairs of his sight he sees Natasha, no Emilija, no Natasha, raise an elegant eyebrow and tap off her earpiece. He is not off key, his voice even dampened by the snow is resonant and clear.

“I have seen their mothers,” he keeps singing even though Natasha is no longer listening. “And I will no other, to follow me where I'm going.” He’s heard the song before. In his apartment building, in Bed Stuy, blasting through the thin wall of the hallway from that bike messenger girl’s place. Multicolored hair, last time it was, like, pink. When was the last time? Alisa? Amy? But that was not now that was after now.

Black t-shirt, gold chains, over steroided biceps in ill-fitting suit jackets, the mark is fucking early and he brought company. They walk like men ready for a fight, they walk like men who’ve seen one too many Tarantino movies and play particular scenes over and over again. Natasha’s only two floors up. Natasha’s comm is off.

There’s a long black dress on her bed and the three knives that fit best in the thigh sheath above her stockings, in the valley between her breasts and that one that looks like a comb, acts like a comb, right until it’s acting like a convenient method of getting you to donate blood… to the walls. Natasha is sitting at the dressing table unpinning the curls in her hair. Time is compressed and expanded.

Get it together Clint. You weren’t singing some song you’ve only ever heard through walls. You were singing off key. Yeah, Sherlock? But this isn’t where things go sideways. Why is it already going sideways?

She blots her lipstick on a piece of tissue and it comes away a vivid shade of red. She looks up, stands in a short kimonoy thing. She moves towards the door. She doesn’t take her knives. She knows he’s watching her six. No Nat. Take the scissors. You had the nail scissors. Nat, it’s them, it’s Nezzar.

Shit. Shit. Shit. You’re not gonna move are you? Fucker move! Bow, now. BOW. GRAPPLING ARROW.

He’s still singing about a General and a battle he didn’t want to fight, softer but in tune, singing in the snow his eye glued to his eye piece. It’s a peppy little song and he sounds like a sociopath singing it to himself, his finger not on but next to the trigger of a high powered rifle.

Say it. Coulson, say Coulson. Call SHIELD. He didn’t do it the last time. When this scenario played out the first time he didn’t radio in, didn’t notify SHIELD. Maybe if he did it now she’d actually live,
he wouldn’t have told her how he felt, they wouldn’t have been separated and maybe just maybe he wouldn’t have been at ground zero when Loki decided he had heart. ‘CALL COULSON!’ his mind screams but his face remains blank.

Shut up for a second, Barton, another part of his brain is telling him, the pattern isn’t right. You see that right?

She opens the door. He wonders if she smiles like Emilija for a second before she realizes that they know.

Stop fucking singing, you asshole, and aim. You’re a sniper, aim the fuckin’ sniper rifle and help her the fuck out.

They back her inside but in a moment she is spinning, kicking the nearest goon in the chest. The goon stumbles backwards but only briefly all three of them rounding on her in a more practiced formation. One shit head palms the thigh knife from her bed behind her and Nezzar has a syringe. Did he have a syringe the first time? He doesn’t remember the syringe.

She says something but her head is turned and he can’t see her lips down his scope. She dances a little, surrounded by the three of them, bouncing on her feet to get a clean line of sight for all of them before she makes another move. She leaps at Nezzar, flipping in the air to bring her thighs around his throat, she drops her weight, hanging to drag him down to the ground. It takes a fraction of a second. The other two run at her and when she is on the floor tangled with Nezzar, they pin her.

If she had her comm on, if he was there instead of watching passively through his scope he’d hear her scream that much he knows.

Nezzar extricates himself and then sickeningly slides his body along hers forcing his whole weight down on her and dragging the robe apart beneath him. Natasha bites down on the hand of the man who has his placed it foolishly over her mouth. He cries out but ultimately leaves his fleshy fingers between her teeth watching his boss lick a slimy path across Natasha’s neck.

Nezzar looks up then, Natasha pinned beneath him struggling. Clint can see the horrible arousal in the man’s face before he plunges the syringe into her neck. She gets one convincing kick into the mid-section of the man holding her legs. Nezzar continues nuzzling at her neck until her movement ceases.

She’s not dead. No matter what happens here. You know that right?

Shut the fuck up and just shoot. It’s Natasha, you don’t let Natasha die.

It’s not Natasha. It’s a fuckin’ Loki getting his fuckin’ rocks off fuckin’ dream.

But the pattern isn’t right. Wrong song. Wrong dress. Wrong time frame.

He wants to scream, open his mouth and roar. They wrap her in the bed linen, shoving the dress and her other knives to the ground. He watches as one man throws her over his shoulder. She is small and light when she is not fighting. He forgets how small she really is. He wonders if he’ll be forced to follow them if she isn’t dead, forced to watch, impotent and afar, as they torture or sell her. He is without movement, the song has faded from his lips. His breathing is returning to the deep regulated breaths of a sniper.

‘Do you remember going to sleep?’ his own voice asks in his head. Lucid dreaming, they’d told him, gaining control over the dream state, it was the only way out of the horrifying regularity with which she died.
“No,” he answers out loud. That’s a good sign if he has regained some control if only over the way his lips move and the air he forces over his vocal cords and tongue. He doesn’t remember falling asleep, never remembers falling asleep. He always remembers that it didn’t happen this way. Yes, but can you remember what you were doing before you were here?

‘Where are you, Clint?’

“On a rooftop in the snow,” he says and for once he looks away from the scope. The tarp has gone. He is in the snow now. Strangely he does not feel damp or cold.

‘Well, you’re almost right,’ comes back the thought as if his own brain thinks it’s cleverer than him.

“Wake up now, you son of a bitch,” he says low and terrible as if threatening himself has ever got him anywhere. “She’s dead again, wake up.”

‘The snow,’ his head says insistently, ‘You were in the snow. There was a kid. A snot nosed kid who moved like…’

‘You didn’t see that coming?’ Sokovian accent, English words. Flash of something silver and black. A sneer, he wants to smack right off someone’s stupid fucking face. It’s not enough information. It’s static images through a pin hole and emotion when he needs video footage and facts.

His hands come off the rifle. He still feels like he is gripping something in his left hand. He is still in the snow.

‘You fell down. Imagine the beating you would have got from Trickshot for falling. You fell down and you thought you could just get back up.’ It echoes. The thought echoes as though he was taunting himself, you thought you could just get back up.

He shakes his head hard, once, twice. There are more important things than self-loathing. “But Tasha’s okay. Tasha’s alive.” He won’t say it like it’s a question. Refuses to say it like a question. It’s a statement, a statement of fact.

The wind blowing across the roof picks up.

‘Probably. She’s a survivor…” his mind says because it knows a question even when he doesn’t ask it, ‘Are you?’

A rush of cold air and a sudden thump. His eyes open but the world in front of them is an impressionist’s version. Maybe if he got some distance between them he’d see water lilies instead of color and movement. A braid of blond hair swings into his vision as he blinks trying to focus enough to find her. He is being carried, folded carefully like a child in someone’s arms. Something large and strong is clamped around his side, an organic vice.

“Keep the pressure on him,” he hears her voice call out, “I’ll rig up the IV line.” She is further back and breathless.

“Natasha, he wakes.”

“Not for long if I don’t get some blood back into him.”
If you want to hear the songs Clint thought he was going to sing and then did sing click on the underlined words in the text.

До свадьбы заживёт literally translates as it will heal before your wedding but is the equivalent of the English idiom 'You'll heal' meaning something like suck it up, it's not so bad.

This is a remix of the events at the very beginning of Unfinished Business, Clint's dreams are catching up with him.
Thor places Clint on the central table in the jet. She takes Clint's hand in hers, his eyes roll back in
his head and quickly close. It is for the best as inserting cannulas is a fraction more difficult with him
staring at you. She removes her gloves. From the drawer beneath the table she pulls out the cannula
kit and quickly tightens a blood pressure cuff around his arm to raise an insertion point.

She barely notices Thor as he detaches Clint’s quiver and separates Clint’s bow from his grip. Thor
places both items in a locker above the passenger seats.

“I shall return to the battle for there is little I can do here,” Thor says solemnly. She nods quickly,
noting his vitals and then with cannula in place releases the cuff allowing blood to flow more freely.
She sets him up with platelets first for more rapid transfusion and puts several pints of blood aside for
warming.

“Thank you Thor,” she says barely looking up. Clint is still ashy and tachycardic but his respiration
rate is constant. “If he was still conscious he’d thank you too.”

“Only if you forced his hand, I know little of Barton save that he believes himself invincible.”

She smirks at the idea, perhaps it would seem that way to an outsider but it is hard to believe it when
she has sown him back together so many times, “Lies, all lies.”

“Are we not all fools and weaklings playing at better men than we are?” Thor muses not unkindly.

She pauses in her efforts to remove his shooting glove and uniform coat to ask, “Or Gods?”

“Indeed,” he smiles back at her and stalks to the cargo bay door, his red cape wrapping around his
body with a gust of wind from outside.

The Captain’s voice crackles in her ear piece as Thor takes off, “Second enhanced in the field,
female, do not engage.”

“Cap, you got Strucker?” she hears Stark ask, more subdued, the fight must be dying down.

“Yeah,” Steve is quick to respond.

Stark’s voice cuts in again, “I got something bigger.” There is a soft murmur of awe in his voice.

Natasha pulls Clint’s body into the recovery position being mindful of the intravenous line pumping
platelets back into his body. His coat has been shreded down his right side and his undershirt sticks
to the injury beneath. She has to remove the layers of soaked dressings to get rid of the coat. The
wound begins to ooze again.

“I know you only passed out to avoid my wrath,” she mutters as she works.

The scepter is retrieved and passed off to Thor while she seals off Clint’s injury. She layers clean
sterile pads over the injury site before wrapping them with enough pressure to help his body start
sealing itself but not enough that it restricts his breathing. She can’t tell if any organs beneath the
damaged musculature have been harmed by the blast but slowly with the increase in fluid the
difference in his systolic and diastolic pressures is expanding.

The sounds of the forest swirl around her, now the distant sound of battle has died off. A tree branch creaks nearby. She hits the button on the blood pressure monitor again to take another reading. The quinjet at rest is so very grey, the filthy remains of Clint’s dressings the only point of contrast. The monitor makes a regular and insistent beep and the hull clinks quietly cooling in the snow.

She shivers once, her body temperature dropping with inaction. She drags a silver hypothermia blanket over his body and stands to close the cargo bay door.

Thor returns first. She sees him marching through the snow covered undergrowth, a true Viking hero against the back drop of knotted trees and the evidence of battles won. In his right hand he holds the leather strap of his hammer and the golden handle of Loki’s scepter. She untangles her hand from where it has been clutching Clint’s and engages the mechanism to drop the ramp to Thor.

Once she had pretended to be a post graduate student at a university, to get close to a mark she had memorized reams of early English literature. It is knowledge rarely needed now, especially with the sudden demise of her role as a spy. As Thor climbs the ramp again though she is reminded of words she’d learned in a language that sounded nothing like the English she was now surrounded by ‘Nor have I ever seen. Out of all the men on earth, one greater, Than has come with you; no commoner carries, Such weapons, unless his appearance, and his beauty, Are both lies.’

Thor sets down the scepter and looks to her. He is surprisingly quiet when she only answers with a shrug. She listens in to Stark’s comm as she monitors Clint’s vitals hearing the play by play of the lullaby Stark and Banner have worked out. Despite her reservations it seems to work well.

“Hey Big guy,” Stark's voice rings out clear across the grunts and crashes of the Hulk. “Sun’s going down.” A long pause though the feed seems to indicate that the animalistic noises of the green giant are turning more curious than bent on destruction. “Might be time to come in?” How Stark manages to sound as unconcerned as he does she does not know. It is clear that Banner’s ‘Other Guy’ doesn’t see Tony as another threat. Some part of Banner still making calls says the man in the shiny metal suit is a friend.

“Time to take a nap?” Stark says as though he was talking to a troublesome three year old and there is just enough in the inflection that makes her think perhaps Tony isn’t absolutely certain he won’t get a tantrum for saying the nap word.

She’s listening to the rhythm of Stark’s breathing and trying to hear the sounds of the Hulk carried down his comm. She notices through the almost translucent skin of his eyelids that Clint’s eyes dart forward and back, up and down with erring irregularity, unlike Banner Clint is dreaming. She is wondering what he sees in the infinite spaces when Steve arrives.

“How is he?” he says leaning down over her his helmet off and his shield resting next to a seat.

“He’ll live,” she says and refuses to read into the look Steve casts over her, “Did you capture the enhanced?”

“NATO’s taken Strucker into custody,” he says beginning with the thing she did not ask, she frowns that means a no, “They’ll keep searching for his lab rats.”

“They’re dangerous, Steve.” She knows he assumes she means for what the male enhanced did to Clint in the field and finds herself exhausted at the thought of explaining that she is the end result of lab rats raised by something not too far from Hydra.
“I’m aware,” Steve says, clipped and annoyed. The heavy landing of Stark and Banner interrupts what is sure to be another of Steve Rogers’ disappointed dressing downs. Banner looks drained held up mostly by Stark’s suit. Banner leans towards the wall allowing pieces of the Iron Man suit to unwrap themselves from Stark’s body.

Steve hands the doctor a grey long sleeved t-shirt as he says, “Dr Banner, thank you again for all your help.”

Bruce stares at the shirt for a moment as if computing how to dress himself is too difficult, a Code Green hangover well in place. He tugs the neck down over his head “My part in it is very small, Captain and the other guy isn’t good at etiquette.” His arms follow through the shirt and he tiredly gestures to the bank of seats at the back of the craft, “If you don’t mind…”

“Of course,” Steve says politely.

Stark freshly de-suited proffers headphones and asks with an agitated grin, “Smooth Jazz or Gregorian Chants?”

“Tony,” Banner just answers flatly and takes the headphones quickly covering his ears.

“Nightie Night, Bruce,” Stark answers and it’s oddly sweet for a grown man with a penchant for the sarcastic.

“Stark, with Barton down…” Steve says as she switches out the platelets for the warmed red blood cells. Clint is still pale but not as cool to the touch as before, his breathing less shallow. She suspects if she rubbed hard against his sternum he’d wake.

“Everyone’s preparing for the smoothest take off yet.” Stark grins at her pointedly. She raises an eyebrow.

“I won’t leap to defend him. He was stupid enough to get hit.”

“Thor, the scepter?” The Captain continues as though they were a battalion not what Banner has always called a time bomb.

“It is secure. We have succeeded, my friends.”

“And on that note, please have your seats in the upright position and all carry on luggage or broken archers safely stowed in the overhead compartments,” Stark says climbing into the pilot’s seat, his face illuminated by the blue cast of the screens. A little way into the flight she leaves her seat behind Stark to check again on Clint. He is pinking up with the steady flow of blood back into his leaking body and groggily awake. The Captain injects the second drip line with a pain killer because he is a sucker for Clint’s groans when she is not. She checks his blood pressure reading as Clint mumbles something about ‘the kid in the field’ to Rogers.

“Later, Barton, later,” she hears Rogers reply and Clint’s head falls back against the table.

Banner, his headphones blocking out the murmur of chatter from Thor and Rogers, is staring into the middle distance. She knows the look, seen it on too many faces to count. He is replaying images of men crushed beneath his feet or building crumbled into dust and of a particular woman’s face horrified and fearful. It’s a game she and Clint have indulged in time and time again but it is one that never benefits the player. Sometimes you need to have the chips taken from your hand.

“Hey,” she says softly, crouching down in front of him so he has time to remove the head phones,
“So the lullaby worked.”

Banner gives her a grateful smile that seems to hold back enough to be saying, ‘this time’, he shrugs “The Code Green’s always…”

"If you hadn't have been there, there would have been double the casualties. My best friend would have been a..." she smiles, "treasured memory."

It's not enough, she knows this, but at least it's enough to distract him from the playback, a playback that does more harm than it can do good. His voice sounds rough when he responds, "You know, sometimes exactly what I want to hear isn't exactly what I want to hear."

She doesn't blame him for assuming she's playing him, it means he's astute but she feels tired at the thought of how many people she will continue to have to convince just like him. Part of her longs for the simplicity of the craft, the getting what you need and getting out. "How long before you trust me?"

His lips twitch for a moment as he decides how to reply, "It’s not you I don’t trust," he says and then shakes his head slightly "and on that I don’t think we differ."

The Hulk is terrifying, all uncontrolled rage, but he has a skill set they sorely need. She knows an asset when she sees one.

"Thor, report on the Hulk."

“The gates of Hell are filled with the scream of his victims!” Thor intones his large hands leaving his hips to form a mighty fist as he speaks. As quickly as Natasha considers if Asgard has a concept of Hell to begin with, Banner groans throwing his face into his hands. She looks back at Thor, incredulous, behind him Steve closes his eyes offering no assistance.

“But not the screams of the dead of course,” Thor attempts to correct from her look as Steve examines the ceiling, “No, no, wounded screams mainly, whimpering, a great deal of complaining and tales of sprained deltoids and uh and uh…” Thor looks away, “gout”

“Hey Banner,” Stark thankfully interrupts, “Doctor Cho is on her way in from Seoul. Is it okay if she sets up in your lab?”

“Ah. Yeah, she knows her way around,” Banner replies.

“Thanks,” Stark says and then he drops his voice to speak only to JARVIS. She stands, patting Banner once on the shoulder to return to the broken archer, catching the end of Stark’s conversation with the mechanical butler, “…Barton’s going to need the full treatment.”

“Very good sir.”

Clint instinctively clenches his hand around hers when she returns and though he tries to open his eyes again he fails.

“Nat?” he asks quietly.

“Here,” she responds. He nods once and seems to calm.

Stark grows impatient with piloting much sooner than Clint would, “JARVIS take the wheel”

“Yes sir, approach vector is locked,” the AI responds as he leaves his seat.
At the back of the jet she can hear them discussing the scepter as Banner rolls his head back against the bulkhead and begins to doze.

“Feels good yeah? You’ve been after this thing since SHIELD collapsed not that I haven’t enjoyed our little raiding parties but…” She can’t help but pay attention, some part of her brain filing away everything they say to be used at a later date, some part of her demanding her attention for the sake of her security.

“No, but this, this brings it to a close,” Thor says resolutely, his voice carrying through the air more so than the others.

“As soon as we find out what else this has been used for and I don’t just mean weapons, since when is Strucker capable of human enhancement?” Rogers says.

“Banner and I will give it the once over before it goes back to Asgard,” Stark says speaking a fraction too fast, “Is that cool with you? Just the few days till the farewell party, you’re staying right?”

“Yes, yes, of course. Victory should be honored with revels.”

Stark leans down against the bench, “Yeah, who doesn’t like revels? Captain?”

“Hopefully this puts an end to the Chitauri and Hydra so, yes, revels,” Rogers agrees.

“Revels,” she mutters under her breath and squeezes Clint’s hand once, reassured when she feels him return the gesture.

Chapter End Notes

I've done my best with all the moving pieces and such little information as to how badly injured Clint was. He needs evac but then Thor is okay to provide first aid (Don't get me wrong I don't think Thor is a himbo but his knowledge of mortal first aid has got to be iffy)? During the split second we see him in the flight he seems to be conscious with a saline (probable) drip and Steve fiddling with his cannula, but Tony say's Barton's going to need the full treatment? When they come off the jet, he is up right and appears conscious but is rushed with Nat at his side into 'treatment' with Dr Cho and two other assistants.

Time passes in such a weird way in this movie.

So I've done my best.

Natasha continues to be the first person to say, 'it's not your fault' to everyone except Tony.

Let me know what you think and Happy 4th of July to my American readers.
Your own girlfriend won't be able to tell the difference

They rush past Steve and Thor on their way down the ramp into the waiting, rational arms of Dr Cho. Her peremptory Korean orders wrap round Natasha’s ears like bojagi and deaden her comprehension. They pass Maria Hill and Natasha catches her eye, two blank expressions unwilling to admit they remember the last time they passed this way.

“He is stable,” Dr Cho says to Natasha more than to her two assistants to whom she speaks efficient Korean.

“See Romanoff,” Clint croaks, “Coulda stayed in the fight.” His eyelids are still heavy and his lips are parched.

“Tis but a scratch?” she asks dryly.

“No, the tissue damage is severe without this technology we would have to resort to skin grafts,” Dr Cho answers humorlessly.

‘Doctors’ Clint mouths at Natasha while Cho examines her field dressings more thoroughly. Clint groans as the gurney jumps over the lab’s threshold.

She stands back letting the assistants shift and prep him for Dr Cho’s miracle machine. She refuses to allow her hands to clench every time his breathing changes. Even though she is only catching glimpses of his face through the movement of the medics she can see the way pain stops the breath leaving his body as his muscles clench and then he forces a cover, the lines around his eyes creasing with a smile instead of a grimace.

When his is on his side his suit’s undershirt pulled up around his chest and sterile dressings draped around the raw injury site he opens his eyes again, searching for her. She steps further back into the corner, imagining shadows in the brightly lit glass labs Stark seems to favor. He appears more coherent now but he may still reach for her. She could not stare these people down, demand that they mind their own business, they are not spies, they are not even professionals in the way she has come to define the word. These people are determined to make her their business.

Stark enters dressed in the black sweater he pulled on for the return flight, the others had left to change and clean themselves of the reminders of combat and the alter egos they so readily pretend are separate from themselves. Stark has stayed, flitting around his own lab beneath this one his fingers dancing manically over holographic images and echoing the same movements when there is no longer screens to dance across.

“Dr Helen Cho,” he declares, “Pleased you could join us.”

“Mr Stark,” Dr Cho nods though she is clearly preoccupied with the information on the pad in front of her. “The grants Stark Industries provide act as an impressive incentive.”

“Yeah, well, we can’t let them see the Avengers bleed now can we.”

“And here I thought they were for scientific works for the benefit of the human race.”

“Sure, sure. Will he live or do we need to recruit a guy who throws a spear?”

“Might die of thirst,” Clint says rolling his eyes and turning his head as much as he can to get a better look at Stark, “but I’d be looking for a pilot first. Might have been fighting blood loss and pain meds
but that landing was rough, Man.”

“I’ll get JARVIS on it right away,” Stark muses, “required skills: master of the Sling Shot and no back talk.”

“You may have something to drink during the treatment. It won’t interfere with the bonding process,” Dr Cho says ignoring the ongoing battle of sass Barton and Stark have struck up so quickly between them.

Stark looks up at her then and nods and Natasha wonders if he is glad to have been given a task as his fingers clench and retract quickly like a conductor in the anxious moments before picking up his baton.

As Stark leaves she returns to Clint’s side, for a moment there is relief in his eyes as if he had imagined she had left him. Banner passes Stark on the stairs and enters through the sliding doors.

Dr Cho looks annoyed, the coming and goings of Avengers ruining the surgical precision of her domain. “I assure you Mr Barton will make a complete recovery,” she says as the blue spider webs of light begin flashing back and forth across the damage to Clint’s skin.

Banner smiles and more animated than she has seen him be for some time he begins to pepper Cho with questions about the control of the regeneration process and the possibility of uncontrolled cellular division.

Clint’s eyes flick back to her, a silent plead to make this somewhat bearable for him. Clint is a terrible patient. Clint is impatient and aggressively against being told to stay put. And Clint Barton is too concerned with his reputation for being just a pair of eyes and a bow to show interest in the science speak of Banner and Cho.

She leans down and lets an evil smile play across her lips for a moment as she examines the regeneration device, “You sure he’s going to be okay? Pretending to need this guy really brings the team together.” Clint injury is already looking less like a gash and more like severe gravel burns.

“There's no possibility of deterioration. The nano-molecular functionality is instantaneous. His cells don't know they're bonding with simulacrum.”

“She is creating tissue,” Banner says in awe, revealing a little more of the young scientist who wanted to develop a serum to save the world and ended up trying to hide from it.

Dr Cho for her part looks pleased, “If you brought him to my lab, the regeneration cradle could do this in twenty minutes.”

“Oh, he's flat-lining. Call it. Time?” Stark says returning, his hands full of the green fluid he habitually drinks.

“No, no, no. I'm going to live forever,” Clint chuckles, “I'm gonna be made of plastic.”

“Here's your beverage,” Stark says handing off one of the green drinks.

“You'll be made of you, Mr. Barton,” Dr Cho says, a patient smile on her face. It's the wrong way to handle Clint, a man for whom consolation and reassurance are routinely dismissed as for people who don't actually risk death on a daily basis, “Your own girlfriend won't be able to tell the difference.”

Clint pauses over the straw of the drink, “Well, I don't have a girlfriend,” he says lowly.
“That I can’t fix,” Dr Cho says smartly and it quickly shuts Clint up. He grimaces when he tastes the chlorophyll based drink and then looks back for her. Natasha cross her arms over her chest as Dr Cho continues her presentation, no one has noticed the silent conversation Clint is attempting to have with her from the bed. “This is the next thing, Tony. Your clunky metal suits are going to be left in the dust.”

“Well, that is exactly the plan. And Helen, I expect to see you at the party on Saturday.”

“Unlike you, I don't have a lot of time for parties,” Cho says dismissively as Natasha snags one of the beverages from behind Stark. “Will Thor be there?”

Clint chuckles down the straw of his drink as Tony smirks dragging Banner out the door with him.

“There’s a party?” Clint asks her once they’ve gone. Dr Cho is discussing statistical results in a hybrid of Korean and English with her assistants. She pulls a stool out from underneath the nearest bench to sit beside him.

“Revels, I believe.”

“Am I invited?” Clint says twisting as much as he can beneath the curved machine. I don’t like to be cooped up, he tells her often enough.

“I doubt it,” she grins.

“Didn’t want to go anyway.” He manages an almost believable pout.

She drags her response out sounding faintly bored, “Didn’t you?”

“Well, not unless…” He shrugs as much as he is physically able.

“Unless?”

“Will Thor be there?”

“Shut up Barton.” She fell for it, it was such an easy set up. Stupid man.

“But his arms are so dreamy,” he sighs, the creases at the sides of his eyes are origami folds of delight, “Hey Nat?” he adds his voice returning to a sensible low rumble.

“Hawkeye.”

He fixes her with his eyes, “Thanks.”

She nods once. Clint yawns, resting his head on his bicep.

“I can get you into the party,” she relents. He raises his eyebrows, “You can be my plus one.”

“But if I’m with you how will I ever get Thor to notice me?”

She rolls her eyes, “Mocking your doctor seems to be the best way to end up with six months of rehab rather than another thirty minutes of making you plastic.”

He hands her the empty plastic cup. It is coated in green residue like the bottom of an ignored garden pond. She doubts she can keep him here for much longer. His voice is a low complaint, “The Doc doesn’t care what I say, I’m just the lab rat,” he closes his eyes, safe in the knowledge that she is standing watch.
His eyes snap open, “Lab rat… the kid, the fast kid with the attitude… did ya get him?”

“No,” she says firmly, looking out the glass wall towards Banner and Stark examining holographic balls of complex computer coding. “Rogers is certain they’ll show up again.”

“They? The twins.”

She turns back to him, “You know who they are?”

“There were rumors. Twin survivors of Strucker’s experiments. Volunteers of a sort.” Of a sort, he says, as though he already imagines they can be saved or that they didn’t have a choice in the matter. Of a sort, he says, as though whatever the man in the tracksuit did to him was forgivable. “I think there was more in the stuff I gave Hill.”

“We need to stop them.”


“They’re dangerous,” she snaps and realizes instantly that she is more tired than she thought. She shakes her head, letting her short red hair fall between them and shield her, “Look what they did to you.”

“I’m fine,” he says making a half arsed attempt to sit upright. She quickly shoves him back down against the bed. He grins again, “My own girlfriend couldn’t tell the difference.”

“I thought you didn’t have a girlfriend?” she smiles tightly.

“Yeah, I should find someone to fix that for me.”
Would you be happy with a protein bar and a nap?

“You don’t have to walk me back, Nat. I swear I’ll be a good boy.” He holds up three fingers like he is attempting to take an oath. She rolls her eyes but breathes in calmly, he may be deliberately gesturing like a girl guide just to annoy her.

“You heard Cho, the regeneration process is effective but taxing. You need food, fluids and sleep.”

“I heard, I heard,” he says beside her exhaustion making his answer irritable instead of their airy usual back and forth. His shoulders are slumped and his left foot falls a little faster than the right against the floor as they walk back to his room.

She raises an eyebrow, “In no part of that did she mention target practice or roof climbing.”

She unzips the top of her suit and imagines the steady beat of hot water down the back of her neck and shoulders. At some point tonight she plans to smell of nothing but goat’s milk soap and clean cotton. The smell of blood and gun fire residue is clinging to her but it, like the sweat and damp of the fight, has become so a part of her that she knows she is no longer aware of it.

“Yeah?” he chuckles dryly and it sounds more like a cough than a laugh, “You might be over estimating my rebellious streak. You don’t need to police me. I’m gonna fall asleep in my hot pockets.”

“Hot pockets?” she replies incredulously turning on him as she comes to a halt. Why would he willingly eat cardboard pockets of the melted death of dreams? How did he even get hot pockets into the tower?

He shrugs and continues walking towards the elevators, “Ya just heat and eat.”

“You eat like a child,” she answers picking up the pace to catch him before the doors close.

“Whatever,” he says like a surly teenager.

In the shimmering chrome of the elevator doors she sees him attempt to glance at her without her knowledge. He has pulled what is left of his undershirt back over the site of his injury. The burnt and bloody hole creates a frame around the newly created skin. He throws his head back and then rolls it to the side, gazing down at her, “Would you be happy with a protein bar and a nap?

Her index and middle fingers above the first knuckle, where her gauntlets and gloves left her exposed, draw her attention. Embroidered in the creases and crevices of her skin is the fine brown lace of Clint’s blood. She quickly looks away, “I’d be happier if you stopped getting injured.”

“Time to stop pretending I can keep up with these guys?”

The doors open into the hallway outside his room.

“I didn’t say that,” she says, following him out.

“Yeah,” he grunts out, “You didn’t.”

The doors to his room slide apart as he approaches and he ignores the kitchenette in favor of the bedroom. She follows silent and watching. There is a large unmade bed in the center of the room and Clint sits and leans down wincing slightly as he begins to unbuckle and unlace his boots. His suit’s
boots are longer and heavier than the usually barely laced boots and tennis shoes he traipses about in. When the laces are loose enough he begins tugging the shoes from his feet.

She turns to the chest of drawers near the wardrobe. In the first drawer down is three t-shirts, folded carefully by a store clerk, unwashed and thrown inside. Dark blue, grey and a reddish purple color but otherwise identical, she selects the grey one. Next to the t-shirts is an opened seven pair pack of boxer briefs in black and two pairs of thick socks.

She turns towards him clean t-shirt in hand, he is unbuckling the various clasps strapping his pants. He looks back up at her taking the t-shirt from her unresisting grasp. Clint fingertips search for the hem of the ruined undershirt but his eyes remain on her face. He offers a half smile and then as if noting the lack of response from her, pauses tilting his head. “How are you doing, Tasha?”

She looks down as she shrugs and her red hair falls forward from behind her ear. A forelock is caked in mud, sweat and possibly his blood. She sighs softly, “Nothing a hot shower won’t take care of.”

He nods once and then again. “Okay… okay,” he says, standing and pulling the undershirt over his head. It drags his hair forward, pulling some of it down across his creased forehead when looks back at her. “No!” he says abruptly and she feels herself stiffen at the shock of it, “You know what I’m asking. Was I gone too long?”

She widens her stance and wraps her right hand around her left wrist. “You were gone exactly as long as you had to be.”

Clint frowns more deeply, waits a breath and then two before pushing the hair from his face and pulling the fresh t-shirt over his head. She sees him clock her hands, the position of her feet. She can see the quick calculation he makes in his eyes and then he steps forward.

“I was gone when everything fell apart,” he says and she feels her lips part involuntarily, “You had to do… you didn’t have anyone watching your back.”

It isn’t true, she had people. She cannot help but find herself admitting at least to the soundless void in her head that they were not the right people. She wants to force her face to grin and her voice to sound light. She wishes to say that ‘there is nothing like a giant conspiracy for showing you just how much you’ve come to depend on people.’ But the void scribbles equations in her head, people = weakness, trust = weakness, dependence = weakness and weakness = death.

She swallows, “Rogers is no slouch, Clint.”

“I know that,” he says. “And I know you.” He comes closer this time and when she blinks his hand wraps around her own, his callouses rubbing against her skin. “Natasha,” he says his voice low and close to her ear, “Was I gone too long? You’re still my best friend but… was I gone too long?”

Her hand come loose from her wrist and he threads his fingers through her own. Her lips curve softly at one corner.

“I thought you didn’t have a girlfriend?”

“I don’t. I had a partner though.”

“A partner?” she asks as he leans back grinning ridiculously.

“Yeah. She was amazing. Kept my ass outta the fire more times than I care to think about. Funny, sexy as hell, smart, so damn smart…”
“Shut up, Barton,” she says, shoving him hard. He laughs, barking out his ludicrous joy.

His right hand comes up tapping at her uncovered sternum where a tiny arrow once resided. “I love you, Natasha.”

“I know.”

“Was I gone too long… did the world change too much?” he whispers the questions into her hair, one hand caught between them. She knows what he is asking, knows he’s been trying to ask it for days. Did I miss my chance to have you love me, Natasha? Am I still allowed to love you, Natasha?

“No ястреб,” she says and leans closer pressing a kiss to his cheek. “You weren’t gone too long.”

“Hawk.”

“Yes, hawk.”

He beams. He lifts her from the ground, pulling her back into his arms and attempting to spin her around in an approximation of some romantic comedy she can’t imagine him ever seeing. In an instant her hand is in his hair and she pulls tight and hard, “Put me down. Now!”

He lowers her back to the ground but the grin never leaves his face, between his open teeth she can see his pink tongue poking into a molar. She presses her lips together in a firm line but his smile is contagious forcing one side of her mouth upwards. She looks away, shaking her head.

“Aw Tash.”

“No ‘aw Tash’. If you’ve destroyed your brand new synthetic skin there will be hell to pay.”

She runs her hands under his t-shirt and over his sides, she can feel hard muscle and the tiny contractions at the sudden skin to skin contact. The repaired side is faintly smoother and lacking any body hair.

“Well, I can do,” he says, leaning into her touch, “No partner? Wouldn’t go through that again for all the money in Tony Stark’s bank account.”

Natasha lifts herself up on her toes and stops his chatter with her mouth. He pushes back against her lips hungrily, tilting her chin back with bow string fingers rough in places that feel like home. His nose presses against hers and he inhales in time with her. Her fingers continue searching out his skin, curling around him.

He draws back, his hands tracing around the edge of her face before he says, “I’m not gonna be able to hide you in my room until that party am I?”

“No.”

“Yeah,” he agrees, his shoulders slumping forward in defeat.

“I am a spy,” she says, raising an eyebrow, “I can hide myself wherever I please.”

“Of course you can.”

“You will eat something not wrapped in foil and then you will sleep,” she orders.

Her fingers are still pressed into the warm new skin beneath his t-shirt and she is acutely aware that Clint is now missing a very specific scar. Once there was a fading pink slash across the lower right
side of his back, a shiny smooth line that marked a moment in time, a piece of their history.

“Yes ma’am,” he answers hoarsely.

She frowns and not certain why, she buries her forehead in his shoulder. His arms immediately come up and wrap around her but she can feel his own confusion through his skin.

“Your girlfriend might not be able to tell the difference,” she says, finding her voice, “but I can.”
“Ms Romanoff? Ms Romanoff?”

Natasha rolls on to her back beneath the warm blankets and gazes towards the ceiling. Her hip seems to groan in response to the action. She’ll need to stretch out her iliotibial band before working through her morning routine.

“I am sorry to disturb you at such an hour but Mr Barton is requesting access to your suite,” JARVIS continues, “His heart rate is elevated and he appears to be having difficulty answering questions. I cannot perform further diagnostics without his consent. However, it does not appear to be the result of Dr Cho’s procedure.”

She is already sitting up and pushing her feet into the soft carpets before the butler completes his briefing.

“Thank you JARVIS. I’ll let him in myself,” She tugs the old t-shirt down across her abdomen smoothing it’s lines as she stands, “Please cut the security feed from my suite.”

“As you wish, Ms Romanoff.”

She fell asleep with wet hair, her curls are wild thistles tangled together and made thistledown by her head against the pillow.

Her door opens into the darkened hall. Clint is pacing ineffectually, covering the distance of six or seven steps only to return again. The t-shirt he slept in after she’s made him shower is darkened beneath his arms and in a jagged v down his sternum.

“Clint,” she calls softly and he looks up almost surprised that she has answered.


“Clint, you’re sweating.”

“Yeah,” he says without looking away from her. She can see the glazed hue of his eyes even in the dim light coming from her suite. It is no wonder that JARVIS thought him unable to answer questions. "I’ll, um, go take another shower," he says though he makes no effort to leave. He licks at his bottom lip.

“Come inside,” she says, stepping away from the door and considering if she’ll need to instruct him on how to perform the task.

“Yeah. Okay.”

Thankfully he follows. She paces to the kitchenette, her feet cold on the tile as she pulls a glass from the cupboards.

“Water?” she asks as she turns back to him. Perhaps she should have stayed but he had fallen into a deep sleep soon after she’d forced him to eat. She’d pulled a blanket over him, tried to shift him enough that he wouldn’t strain his neck and then left for her own quarters and the long, hot shower
that awaited.

“Yeah.”

She waits as he gulps down the entire glass and then gratefully returns the glass to her, he shrugs a little when she refills it for him. This time as he drinks a little more slowly she asks, “Dreams?”

“Something like that,” he says slipping past her to put the empty glass on the counter. When Clint turns back his eyes refocus. He takes her in, his lips quirk a fraction, the beginnings of a smile, “Is that my shirt?”

“No,” she says of the faded t-shirt, overly large for her frame with the stylized, old fashioned, possibly ironed on decal of a band adorning her chest.

“Looks like my shirt,” he says, reaching out to play with the fabric’s edge falling halfway between her elbow and her shoulder.

“Are they getting any better?”

“Yes…” he says eventually, looking up from his intent examination of the t-shirt she refuses to admit she stole from him. “I’m trying…” He shrugs again it’s an attempt at an unspoken apology, one she isn’t allowed to make him take back, “I knew you were here. I just thought it would help to see you.”

“Does it?”

“Yeah.” He is openly staring at her now, the scruffy goatee indistinguishable from the shadows on his face.

She purses her lips, “Okay then.”

“Okay then?”

“Come to bed.”

The crease between his eyebrows deepens, “I thought… with Stark… and Rogers and Hill?”

“No shouting from the rooftops,” she supplies.

“Yeah,” he agrees, leaning against the counter.

“There is something between rooftops and absence, ястреб.”

His frown dissipates with her final word and she brushes past him and away from the kitchen. His voice is low when he replies, “Bed sounds good.”

“Come then.” Natasha pauses long enough to take his hand tugging him closer as she passes.

Behind her she feels him fall into step. Tilting his head downwards, she hears him breathe in deeply.

“You smell good.”

She smells like clean cotton and goats milk soap bought from a dusty market in little Ukraine. It is the kind of sentiment Clint would never have allowed himself to express before, seemingly innocuous and yet crossing a very clear line. Without a joke, a snigger, a wry duck of his head like he is expecting to be hit, the words tie them together too unmistakably.

“And you smell like a sweaty man,” she says turning in towards him. She looks down at his hands,
large knuckles, wide nail beds, fading tan line skirting the shape of a shooting glove, and frowns. “Your hands are cold.”

She reaches up pressing her left hand into his forehead. Clint has always been unusually warm, lit by an unseen furnace. When she cups his cheek to determine if he is running a fever he grabs her hand. “Yeah. The rest of me too.”

“We should warm you up.”

“Why, Natasha Romanoff are you trying to seduce me?” Clint asks in return with the kind of cocky humor that was lacking in his earlier conversation.

She raises an eyebrow, leans in as though she will kiss him and then the instant before his mouth reaches hers she answers, “That implies some kind of effort on my part.”

She expects him to laugh but he does not, nor does his forehead furrow indicative of his post dream confusion. Instead he and his ever mobile face still as she draws back. The sudden stillness worries her more than the mystical cold, the lack of laughter or even the raw gash in his side in the snow and mud of Sokovia.

It seems to her that an unwelcome abyss opens into his silence. She has never been afraid of the hard decisions, the moments when your choices are only bad and worse because in the end they are still choices and they are still marked pathways telling you this is what happens next. Even your partner’s blood oozing out from beneath charred flesh offers choices and the mile markers of those choices. I choose to make you live, then my path is clear and my hands are full. What do you do when there are no decisions to make?

Clint’s hands spread out across her cheeks, cold thumbs lying gently over her cheekbones, index fingers at her hairline, “Just. Just let me look at you. It goes quicker. When I look at you,” he says.

She nods and then lays her own hand over his, “Come to bed, Clint.”

He nods his agreement letting his hands fall from her face, “Yeah. Okay.”

She rolls curling into the space under his chin.

“Nat,” he says softly, one hand stroking over the soft cotton of the t-shirt, “You awake?”

“I am now.”

“Sorry. This isn’t working,” he huffs out.

“Dreams?” she asks tilting her head back to look up at him in the blackness.

“No.”

“Still cold?” she says reaching out from the covers and blindly feeling the shape of him for the cool clamminess he had shaken loose before.

He pulls away, muscles of his neck and shoulders tightening under her fingertips. “No. Look,” he says closing his hands around hers to return them to her space, “I used to be able to shut it off. Partner. Best friend. Natasha.” She feels his head shake against the pillows, “Sorry, it’s just been too long since I’ve seen you. I should go.”

He’s dragging himself out from under the sheets before she has a chance to speak. “Clint, you saw
“me before you fell asleep.”

“I haven’t seen you,” he says with emphasis. He hunches over himself on the edge of the bed, she can make out the outline of him, the curl of his spine, the edge of his t-shirt bunched up around his uninjured side and the hard plane of muscle creased at his middle.

“Sex?” she asks but it is barely a question.

“I’m not gonna maul you,” he says turning back towards her, “I just think I should sleep somewhere else.”

“Yes,” she agrees calmly, sitting upright and letting the sheets fall from her, “Or you could ask me what I want.”

There has been a longing tangled up inside her, without a physical place that she could compartmentalize and keep from her thoughts. There have been moments when his fingers have tangled in her hair or his callouses have brushed against her skin that she has wanted to bury herself in him. His eyes lighting up beneath heavy brows, his biceps distending the line of his shirt, the warmth with which he says her name, have made her desire more. He imagines that she does not or cannot feel these things too.

She hears his lips part and the slight intake of air, not quite a gasp, not quite a sigh, “What do you want ‘Tasha?

She moves ignoring the way the sheets tangle around her left leg and foot. She presses her mouth to the indentation beneath his adam’s apple, it rises with his swallow as though he did not expect her. Natasha moves again, upwards, pressing kiss after kiss against the slight stubble on his neck towards his ear and jaw. She is kneeling when she reaches the marker and he turns his face towards her his lips seeking hers out.

When their lips are tied together, moving unhurriedly in tandem he lifts her from the bed pulling her into him and on to his lap. Beneath the sweatpants she can feel him harden a little more against her. She scrapes her nails along the skin of his back, raising them until his t-shirt follows suit and catches beneath his arms.

He leans back pulling his lips from hers to remove the sweat stained shirt, she moves to do the same lifting the hem of the over sized t-shirt she wears. His hands stop hers, his face turned into the crook of her neck shakes a little indicating his preference.

“Okay,” she exhales huskily and lets him take the lead.

He plays with her, rough fingers reach up under the t-shirt swiping over her nipple and stretching gently to the soft swell of breast tissue towards her armpit. Her ignored nipple hardens against the cotton and each movement of her body with his brushes the puckered skin again and again. His other hand lifts her hair from her ear as he sinks his lips and tongue on to the sensitive skin there.

She rolls her hips forward pushing her knees into the very edge of the bed and the warm center of her down on to him. Clint pushes upwards instinctively despite the twin layers of fabric between them.

Her ears ring with the huffs and inhales and wet contacts of their bodies moving together. His hand slips from her hair and moves down her back, his bow string fingers with firm pressure pressing into the muscles of her spine. She arches into his hand and then he travels lower over the curve of her buttocks.
Natasha shifts turning her head so that she can suck at the skin of his bare shoulder. He takes a deep breath, his mouth comes away from her throat and his hand slides over her hip and underneath the band of the loose yoga pants she slept in. The gust of warm breath against her wet skin as he exhales sends a shiver through her.

His hand is not cold when it finds her, his fingers fanning out across her damp lips. She rocks forward meeting him with the same pressure. She stifles the moan that tries to leave her when his hand leaves her breast and his arm wraps tightly around her ribs. She lifts up, breathing into the mess of his blond brown hair as he twists and lifts with her spreading her out over the end of the bed.

It’s still and dark and almost too quiet but she knows where he is at all times, knows his next move before he makes it. She relaxes into not having to guide him or angle herself just so, she lets her hand fall haphazardly over her head and lets out a soft ‘mnmnmnmnn’ when his fingers leave her to begin sliding the pants from her hips.

She giggles quietly when he sighs into her navel as she lifts her hips from the bed. The pants are tugged free and he mouths her hip bone in the least effective of celebrations. His weight shifts erratically over the top of her and the spikes of his hair continue to tickle at the skin of her abdomen.

She feels the soft down of hair on his thighs against her own thigh first, then the satin filminess of his hard penis and the nest of hair that surrounds it. He mumbles unintelligibly as he kisses her belly his hands working their way up her sides beneath the t-shirt to her breasts. Her own hand finds its way into his hair.

Her eyes close, there is very little she can make out in the dark room, the outlines of things closer and the line of light beneath the door. With her eyes closed she feels the pressure of him against her legs change again, lighten and then fingers and the firm prod as his penis enters her.

She reaches out, pressing her fingers into his scapula as he thrusts forward. His hands are positioned around her face and she can smell him, strong and earthy. He is thick and she feels the stretch as her muscles remember him.

He moves easily within her, once every thrust he catches on a point of furrowed tissue and she clenches down on him as he glides away from her.

He has lifted one edge of the t-shirt from her breast baring it to the cooler air and the drag of his chest against hers. Her other breast remains tortured beneath the cotton, swollen and puckered and all too hot beneath its covering.

His breathing is harder now, when it comes in sharp and jagged bursts near her right ear she turns her face towards him nipping at the skin beneath his ear. He groans and she smiles but returns to sucking hard at the newly bruised skin.

Clint lifts her right knee pulling her leg up and over his buttock. It changes the angle of his assault just so and she pants. She feels the corner of his mouth curl upwards.

The next thrust comes with a short ‘ah’ and then he is pulling her hand from the covers above her head to push it down between them. He slides once more, almost leaving her before thrusting back fiercely. His hand is wrapped around three of her fingers and he presses those fingers into the apex of her lips just above her clitoris. The next thrust pushes her up and into the waiting pressure.

It’s a maddening rhythm, a charge of almost and then a moment of gone. She gasps and his mouth is on hers before she has a chance to breathe in. When she throws her head back drawing in a clean much needed breath, he leans in sucking at her bottom lip.
He moves faster, a snapping sound coming at the end of each connection. She can’t help but dig her finger tips into his shoulder and pushes her own hand down to meet him.

He says something muffled in her hair but she ignores it as her muscles begin to tighten, her breath sticks in her semi expanded chest, her back curves up to meet him. She stays like this an instant no longer and then everything she is, has been and will be is released.

She turns her head away as Clint glides through his final thrusts.

They tremble together, the gentle vibration of post coital hormones flooding their systems. His skin is damp but not chilled and his weight is strangely reassuring.

He kisses her cheek and then her collar bone. He softens between her legs. She brushes the hair from his forehead to return the kiss.

He grins into her throat and then rumbling against her skin he says, “You think next time you could maybe not claw me?”

“Claw you?”

“Yeah, Tash,” he chuckles rolling to the side, “Dr Cho’s magic machine isn’t gonna fix this one without a lot of explaining I don’t want to do.”

“Blast from a bunker and tis but a scratch,” she raises an eyebrow in the dark, “but sex with me requires medical intervention?”

He snorts, close enough that she feels the air against her face and she wrinkles her nose. “You said it.”

“You knew who I was when you got into this bed, Hawkeye.”

“The infamous Black Widow, no man survives her bed…” He rests his weight on his elbow and kisses her softly, “I missed you ‘Tasha.”

She licks her bottom lip, she tastes like him, “I’ll let you live… for now.”

Chapter End Notes

Sex! because right at this moment they don't have shit to avenge... Don't worry Tony is working on that.
What’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?

He’s in a leather jacket and probably what constitutes his best dark wash jeans. His shoes are actually quite grown up for him though he still hasn’t rid himself of the attempt at growing a beard. He sighs when the door opens and she finishes looping her earring through her left ear partly because not being ready seems to be the girlish role she’s expected to play tonight.

“Uh, so this is… fancy?” he says scanning the black dress and cream satin bolero she’s chosen for the night. In her heels she is as tall as he is, she smiles sympathetically.

“It’s an adult party thrown by a billionaire.”

“Okay but like I have maybe ten things I can wear and I don’t think my tac suit is gonna work.”

“You look fine, Clint,” she says as he looks at his own shoes before rubbing one on the back of his jeans. She has a faded possibly untrue memory of young soldiers making similar attempts before inspection.

“Yeah,” he agrees half-heartedly. He straightens, giving up any attempt at looking any different and then it is like he is looking at her for the first time. “You look… well, you always look amazing.”

“It’s a dress.” She shrugs.

His smile is crooked but sincere, “And if I stand next to you all night no one’s gonna care what I’m wearing.”

“Please, you’ll have one beer and start hustling pool.”

“That I can do,” he says, his smile growing at the thought. She slips her hand between his arm and his body and he takes the hint, removing his hand from his pocket to escort her to the elevator. He smells faintly of citrus and wood and money he doesn’t have.

“You smell different.”

“There was this basket of stuff in the bathroom. Fancy shit,” he frowns at his reflection in the elevator doors, “I put something green on. Thought it might distract from the fact that I have like one shirt that isn’t a t-shirt.”

She tilts her head thoughtfully, “Stark probably has a tailor on call. Now that the scepter is secure you might have some time to replace your wardrobe.”

“Do I have to?”

“SHIELD isn’t going to dress you anymore.”

“I thought no more monkey suits was the only perk of our government agency going down in flames,” he says. The elevator doors open and they step through.

Clint Barton, for all his complaints about formal dress, could look terrifyingly handsome in a tuxedo or three piece suit. She had never told him. She had listened to his grumbling before and during missions, undone his bow tie when he was too tired to do it himself and she had ignored the way other women’s eyes had followed him to the end of the bar or across the dance floor.

Despite how a sharp suit and a mission could pull him upright and make him look like the man
young girls dreamed about rescuing them, Natasha preferred Clint. This Clint, jeans and shirts that never really seemed to have left a farm, t-shirts bought in bulk or because he liked the band, an odd fondness for the color purple and boots never properly laced.

“You’re an Avenger now, Mr Barton,” she says tucking his shirt collar neatly under the line of his jacket. “There will be appearances to keep up.”

“Nah. You can just shove Stark and Rogers and Thor’s arms in front of a camera. I could slip out the back without anyone even noticing.”

She turns to look at him. She knows he hates crowds and prefers distance but there is something in the way he says that he wouldn’t be noticed that makes her focus in on him. “Rogers asked if you were okay this morning.”

She is an early riser but the Captain appears to barely sleep. She finds him beating punching bags after running marathon distances just as she begins her workouts. She doesn’t mind his company in the gym, he rarely speaks unlike the chatter she would get from Clint and he pays very little attention to her acrobatics like a great many SHIELD agents did.

He scratches the back of his neck and winces a little, “Ah yeah… saw him yesterday morning after… anyway I said I fell asleep on your sofa after a nightmare. What did you say?”

She raises her eyebrow and then taking pity on him she smiles as the doors open. “That you were Barton,” she answers.

“Well ain’t that the truth.”

Stark has gone all out for his revels, though she is sure the party has more to do with the work of Hill, JARVIS and a hundred other Stark employees. The music is live, the drinks flowing.

“Natasha Romanoff, how you doing?”

“Wilson,” she calls brightly to the tall dark man crossing the room, “Are you the Captain’s date for this evening?”

They share a grin as Sam Wilson answers, “Still won’t call any of those girls you keep trying to set him up with.”

“Sam Wilson, this is Clint Barton.”

“Hey Man,” Clint says stepping forward and offering his hand.

Sam takes it easily, “The archer right?”

“Most of the time.”

“And the rest of the time.”

“Injured and making bad jokes,” she says dryly.

Clint rubs his chin and then offers, “I’d argue but she’s always right.”

“Always,” Natasha agrees. Sam’s eyes dart quickly back between Clint and herself. He is a quick judge of people, more on the empathic end of the spectrum than most former military. She can see him try and place Clint’s relationship to her without asking any impertinent questions.
“Yeah, I’m going to find the alcohol,” Clint says, disturbing the calculations Sam’s making, “Can I get you something, Wilson?”

“No I’m good,” Sam says raising the beer he is nursing. To Natasha he asks, “How’s the shoulder?”

“No longer in need of medical attention. Still pulling on your threads?”

Sam shrugs less like he doesn’t know the answer and more like he isn’t sure which answer he is allowed to give, “He’s Captain America, not the kind of guy you let down, you know?”

“His disappointment face is worse than most.”

“So this is the kind of life Avengers have huh?”

“This,” she says and lets her hand sweep out across the party, “is Tony Stark’s life.”

“You did say they’d know where to find you. Tower with a giant A on it makes it pretty damn clear.”

“Yes it does.”

Dr Banner is awkwardly avoiding speaking to anyone present. She watches bemused as he ducks under the expensive lighting and wonders if she might need to rescue him.

“Romanoff! Thank all that is holy and good, I swear the only other women here are aspiring actress slash models.”

Sam chuckles at the sudden arrival of Maria Hill. She turns her very blue eyes on him, looks him up and down in a way that has withered many a cocky raw recruit.

“Agent Hill, isn’t it?” Sam says unwithered.

“Maria is no longer an Agent, Sam,” Natasha says conspiratorially, “She’s Stark Industries best new hire.”

“Mr Wilson, still fighting the good fight at the VA?” Maria says, pulling the olive out of her martini. Sam, despite his initial impressive unwithering, lets his jaw drop slightly at the realization that not only does Maria remember him but she is well aware of where he works and possibly many other less savory pieces of personal information. Maria smiles, “Stark Industries is always looking for new talent,” she punctuates this offer by biting the olive off her cocktail stick.

“Sam please, save my life you get first name privileges,” Sam rallies admirably, “Actually I’m thinking of moving into modelling or maybe acting.”

“So more of a lateral move then,” Maria replies quickly. Natasha raises an eyebrow. This may actually be considered flirting for Maria Hill.

Sam laughs and taps his beer bottle against the edge of Maria Hill’s glass, “I do like to give something back.”

She leaves them quietly to it, finding a comfortable place to people watch and let the music wash over her.

After three games of pool in which his opponent get to shoot less than three times Clint is banned from the table and ousted by The Captain and Wilson. Clint looks across the crowded floor towards where she is sitting, smiles a wistful half smile and hands his stick over to Wilson with less complaint
than is his custom.

Clint consoles himself on the mezzanine by getting his shoes all over Stark’s couch and seeing how long he can keep Helen Cho talking about her work before she realizes how many puns he is inserting into his responses. She catches the occasional reference to molecular bonding and rejection avoidance when she passes them on her way to the bar.

She talks to James Rhodes and finds it easier not to slip into Natalie when he starts to tell her embarrassing Tony stories. She tells him about Stark, hung over in a giant doughnut, and how he’d tried to fire her. Rhodes only response is, “Firing people he can’t actually fire is Tony’s way of saying he cares. You know how many times I’ve been fired?”

While she declines to dance with a man far more obviously in his nineties than Steve Rogers, Maria Hill wins Steve’s jacket at pool. Clint pats the Captain on the shoulder as he passes and tells him it wouldn’t have happened if he’d let him play instead of his fly boy buddy.

The party is dying down though Stark is continuing to introduce a plainly uninterested Banner to every woman left at the party.

It took forty three minutes for Doctor Cho to realize Barton’s game and as an apology he pulls her over to nest of veterans Thor is currently entertaining to introduce her. She does what Natasha has seen many times before and without thought reaches out for an arm or his chest as though she doesn’t quite believe he’s real. Thor smiles unconcerned and declares her to be a mighty healer for he saw the devastation the very mortal Barton incurred in battle. Dr Cho blushes uncharacteristically and Clint walks his very mortal ass back to the bar.

She slides down the end of the bar where Steve Roger’s sans jacket is staring at the shiny surfaces of the many expensive bottles lining the back wall. She shake the cocktail shaker once more until he blinks and sees her.

“What’s a nice boy like you doing in a place like this?” she says in her finest 1940’s transatlantic accent.

“No good woman done me wrong ma’am,” Steve Rogers says with the utmost sincerity.

She smiles a little surprised and pours out the drink into two chilled glasses, “Don’t you need to speak to women for them to do you wrong?”

Steve rolls his eyes, “In my 90’s, not dead…”

“Oh yes,” she says, leaning over the bar. “I met the D day veterans… They seem to get plenty of action.” She raises an eyebrow suggestively, “What’s your excuse?”

“I assume it’s something similar to yours.”

“You know what they say about assuming, Rogers,” she tsks softly and takes a sip from her drink.

“So what guy did you wrong, Romanoff?” Steve asks and it’s clear he doesn’t notice Clint reaching over the bar to steal a beer. She notices. She notices the way the leather of his jacket stretches over his arm. She notices the thump he gives the bottle to flick off the cap against the bar top and the way his eyelashes rest against his cheek when he closes his eyes at his first mouthful.

“Now, now,” she smiles enigmatically, “There you go assuming I wasn’t the one in charge of wrong doing.” Steve frowns and she pushes the remaining drink towards him before leaving for the upper mezzanine.
“That’s nice,” he says as Natasha climbs the stairs. Rogers turns to him quickly. It is clear he hadn’t noticed him further up the bar.

“We weren’t… nothing’s going on, not that…” The Captain responds ever the Boy Scout, as though he’d get drummed out or something were he to actually make a move.

“I know, Cap.”

“It wasn’t flirting.”

Clint shakes his head and leans back against the bar hooking the heel of his shoe over the metal rung that runs the distance of it. “Tasha doesn’t flirt.”

“I could have sworn…” Rogers says and Clint can imagine where he’s going with his thoughts, the soft unobtrusive way she can make you feel like the centre of the universe and like everything you have to say is the most interesting thing she could possibly hear. She gets you to admit things.

“Nah, the Black Widow, any number of persons she’s pretended to be, they flirt…Nat? She doesn’t flirt. It’s nice though.”

But one day if you’re lucky, he thinks but doesn’t say, she lets all of it drop and she teases and criticizes and makes bad jokes, it takes her a lot of effort to let it drop but when it happens that’s Natasha.

“Nice?” Rogers asks while he takes another sip of his beer.

“She trusts you. You’re friends.”

“Friends.”

He can’t help but laugh at the way Rogers says it, like he didn’t know he could have friends or that Natasha was going to be one of them. There is a kind of dumb struck look that passes over his face and all of a sudden he looks nothing like a soldier and nothing like a man used to giving orders.

“Yeah Man, if you get to be her friend, grab it with two hands and don’t let go. You’ll live longer and it’ll be a life worth living.”

“Sounds like you’re speaking from experience.”

"I’m still here aint I?" he chuckles, leaving Rogers to his thoughts.

Her nails are the same shade of red as the drink in her glass, she leans back against the far wall watching the piano player as he works his way through a set too smooth for it to hold Clint’s attention.

"Having fun Hawkeye?"

"I’ve been told I’m not allowed to play pool, Cho won’t let me talk in her presence and Thor has been regaling Rogers’ war buddies with tales of how he carried me like some kinda damsel in distress."

"So a successful night then." She doesn't take her eyes off the band but one side of her mouth curls
mockingly.

"One of my better parties."

He joins her against the wall. He tries with limited success to ignore her lips pressing to the rim of her glass and the tip of her tongue drawing a stray drop back into her mouth.

Eventually she sighs, "I suspect I should go save Dr Banner."

He follows her line of sight. Banner shrugs and then takes his glasses off cleaning them with a handkerchief from his pocket. Next to him Stark is holding court and when he stops talking the audience turns to Banner who shrinks and appears unable to form whole words.

"He does look pretty miserable," he nods his agreement. She pushes off from the wall and gives him a quick smile. "Tasha," he says catching her in mid step before she leaves.

"Mmm."

"I would have asked you to dance."

He looks past her to the couples swaying gently before the band. They look young, unfettered and happy. In truth, he doubts he and Natasha, even as other people, can look young and unfettered but happiness, this happiness, he can do.

"Would have?"

"If we weren’t surrounded by…"

“Our friends?”

He neither agrees nor disagrees but allows himself to openly stare at the beautiful woman in front of him, her brilliant red hair swept back from her ear. “I would have asked you to dance,” he says firmly.

“Clint,” she says making the hard contacts in his name sound more like molasses. She leans slightly bringing one foot up behind her and with the stability of a dancer pretends to adjust the strap of her shoe.

“Yeah?”

“I would have said yes.”

Her green eyes flash beneath her lashes and then she is standing again.

“Go save Banner,” he says hoarsely, “He’s making me feel awkward just looking at him.”

He’s not sure these people are his friends, not in the way he is certain of Natasha and certain of the fact that she is trying to be Rogers’ friend, trying to help or even save Banner and taking every opportunity to atone for the debts she counts ruthlessly, be they real or imagined. Natasha is his best friend and for now, he supposes, that is enough for him to accept these people, despite the clear fact that each of them is an absolute, without question, mess.

Stark’s friend Rhodes is swinging Maria Hill around the dance floor, his hand on the small of her back beneath the leather jacket that swamps her. Towards the end of the song he dips her, letting her dark hair fall towards the floor. She laughs and shakes her head before leaving the floor.
“Hey, Hill,” he says as she approaches.

“Hawkeye.”

“I reckon that drummer’s checking you out,” he offers as she sits on a nearby stool.

Maria Hill merely smiles back, “He has eyes doesn’t he?”

He chuckles and salutes her with his beer, “Cap’s jacket looks good on you.”

“Mmm the spoils of war always do.”

Maria Hill continues to live by the motto ‘Know your value’, he nods, it’s good to know that despite everything Hill’s perfectionism and confidence have remained equal and untarnished.

“You up for a game?”

“Oh no, no, no,” she says her smile growing larger, “I know how to pick my targets.”

“Man!” he exclaims, “Rogers got to you too?”

“Trick shots? You brought it on yourself Barton,” she says sounding vaguely bored. He considers seeing what other trouble he can get himself into or perhaps challenging someone who hasn’t spoken to Rogers to a game of quarters. “You can get me a drink though,” Maria adds, “and I’ll give you 4 to 1 odds that I get his drumsticks when the band goes home.”

Clint grins, “I’ll take that action.”

He’s waiting for the bartender to make a dirty martini for Hill when Stark finds him. “Your little girlfriend is a pain in my ass.”

“I don’t have a girlfriend, Stark.”

“Your spider, partner in crime, whatever, she came up and stole Banner just when I was introducing him to a lovely young dancer.”

Clint stretches out his neck, “Pretty sure Banner had a choice in that.”

“Yeah, like anyone has a choice when faced with Agent Romanoff,” Stark says, petulantly watching Natasha and Banner talk.

“Sounds like Banner just likes her more than you.”


“And we’re done,” Clint says flatly.

Stark double takes at Clint’s expression, “You want to meet a dancer? I’ve got to live vicariously through someone.”

“Nope.”

“Why?” Stark asks, his eyes narrow, “You haven’t got a girlfriend, she’s a dancer, they’re bendy.

Clint accepts the martini from the bartender and swigs the last of his own beer before asking, “What
exactly does Virginia Potts see in you?”

Stark grins as though he’s been handed the greatest opening of all time, “Great wit, generous heart and a fantastic ass.”

He raises his eyebrows and his mouth pulls into a smirk, “I’ll give you ‘fantastic ass’.”

“Thor ordered Chinese,” Maria announces in response to her martini.

“You’re kidding? Didn’t he eat, like, half of those upmarket little snack foods?”

“Only half?”

He shrugs, “Steve ate the other half.”

Maria nods her bottom lip jutting out slightly as she considers this. She takes a sip of the martini and slides from the stool. “Wish me luck with the drummer?” she asks.

“Yeah right,” he huffs incredulously, “I’ve got a twenty riding on this.”

When the room has shrunk to only those who have no homes to return to and Rhodes who Stark won’t allow to leave they hunker down around the centre table dragging the seating closer in and watching in awe as Thor demolishes most of the Chinese banquet he’d ordered.

He joins Hill on the floor resting his back against a padded couch. He hands over a twenty, she slips it nonchalantly under her bra strap. He picks up her trophy drumsticks and spins them round his fingers letting the automatic muscle memory of it mollify him. Hill shakes her head like she has long given up on stopping him from fidgeting.

Natasha and Banner are talking among themselves and the doctor has turned his whole body towards her, seemingly forgetting the rest of Stark’s guests and his social anxiety. The conversation turns to first impressions and the dangerous banter begins.

As he launches into the first time he ever saw Thor, Cho slips off her shoes and curls them up under herself resting her head against the arm rest, making her look more like a child than a doctor.

“So the big guy here,” he spins the drumstick and then points across the table to a grinning Thor, “throws Coulson’s guys around like they are toy soldiers.”

“Yes!” Maria adds like she has just remembered a report, “Denison. Built like a tank. Never lived it down.”

“Right,” he turns towards Hill pointing at her with the same drumstick. She pushes the end of it down with her index finger and he returns to the tale, “and it’s raining. In New Mexico. And the crane I’m in is swinging back and forth. And Coulson says he wants to see what happens next.


“Thor has himself a little cry!”

Everyone laughs including the God himself.

“I roared,” he insists between good natured laughter, “My father, in his wisdom, had refused the power of the hammer to me until I could prove myself worthy.”

This only increases the laughter.
“Roared. Barton, he roared,” Hill repeats failing at a deadpan production.

“But, it's a trick!” Clint maintains over their amusement.

Thor tips something from a flask into Rogers’ drink, “No, no, it's much more than that.”

“Whosoever be he worthy shall haveth the power!” he booms, hamming up the words as much as possible, “Whatever man! It's a trick.”

“Well please, be my guest,” Thor says gesturing to the ornate hammer resting on Stark’s coffee table.

“C’mon,” Stark says egging him on.

“Really?” he asks throwing up the drumsticks.

“Yeah”

As Clint pulls himself from the ground Rhodes grins, “Oh this is gonna be beautiful.” He ignores him as he passes Banner and Natasha she reaches out giving him a pitying pat of solidarity.

“Clint, you've had a tough week, we won't hold it against you if you can't get it up,” Stark says not one to keep his mouth shut if it was possible for it to be open.

“Y'know I've seen this before, right?” he says. Thor raises his eyebrows in acknowledgement but his posture remains relaxed and unaffected. He grips the handle and yanks. The hammer remains fixed upon the table. He chuckles, “And I still don't know how you do it.”

“Smell the silent judgment?” Stark asks leaning forward in his chair.

“Please,” Clint says throwing up a hand to offer the challenge, “Stark, by all means.”

The group murmurs as Stark stands unbuttoning his suit jacket. “Never one to shrink from an honest challenge.” Stark loops his hand through the hammer's leather strap. “Here we go. It's physics.”

He looks over to Natasha she takes a sip of beer and grins at him.

“Right, so, if I lift it, I then rule Asgard?” Stark asks.

“Yes, of course,” Thor replies with an irritating lack of concern.

“I will be fair but firmly cruel,” Stark continues placing his foot up on the tabletop. He pulls. “Be right back.”

When he returns with the gauntlet from his Ironman suit Natasha roll her eyes. Hill at his side declares loudly, “Really?”

Yet Thor leans back in his seat and with a princely glide of his hand allows it. Stark’s ongoing failure quickly becomes a competition. He convinces James Rhodes to don his own gauntlet and soon they are arguing and straining against the hammer's weight.

“Just represent. Pull!” Rhodes insists and Clint spins Hill’s drumsticks again glad he at least had the sense to admit defeat early.

“All right let's go!” Stark cries and both men grunt making Helen Cho cover her laugh behind her hand.
Banner’s attempt is no less of a failure, as his hand slips from the hammer’s handle he roars and tries to make himself look large. He looks to Clint and Maria. They stare back with very little facial expression. Natasha smiles sympathetically well aware of his and Maria’s inclination to pretend only their jokes are funny.

“Let’s go, Steve,” Stark demands. His failure seeming to diminish him very little. “No pressure.”

“C’mon, Cap,” he cheers, hoping that perhaps the man himself can puncture Thor and Stark’s ego just for a moment.

Steve strains and then lets the hammer rest putting his hands up in surrender.

Thor laughs, “Nothing,” and continues to laugh as Rogers takes his seat again.

The room starts to cool but he can’t let the game end there, “And?” he says looking straight at Natasha who has sat bemused through the entire contest.

“Widow?” Banner asks.

“Oh, no no,” Natasha says leaning back languidly, “that's not a question I need answered.”

He gets up, looking for some distance and maybe another beer.

Stark standing by the bar announces, “All deference to the man who wouldn’t be king, but it’s rigged.”

“You bet your ass,” he agrees, patting Stark’s shoulder as he passes

“Steve,” Maria pipes up, “he said a bad language word.”

Rogers throws his head down before looking directly at Stark, “Did you tell everyone about that?”

Clint perches himself on an armchair opposite Natasha. She smiles again but this time he is certain it reaches her eyes. He wonders if with the beer and Natasha’s presence he might be able to give the dreams a miss tonight.

Stark continues as if he had not been asked a question at all, “The handle's imprinted, right? Like a security code... "Whosoever is carrying Thor's fingerprints" is, I think, the literal translation” he lectures.

“Yes, well that's uh, that's a very, very interesting theory,” Thor says standing, Stark's expensive whiskey and the concoction he’s been plying Rogers with all night in one hand. “I have a simpler one.” He reaches for the hammer and as though it weighed nothing at all he plucks it from the table, tossing it and catching it again like a consummate performer, “You are all not worthy.”
It’s a screech that brings them all to their feet but it is what follows that changes everything. Stark is muttering to his pad about a buggy legionnaire but Natasha already knows this is not so simple.

She has heard too many men rant and vent their distaste for humanity, and for her in particular, to believe it is anything so easy to ignore. JARVIS does not answer him and she sees from where she is standing the way Stark’s face tightens, he is still running numbers and possibilities but now there is panic. The hastily reassembled robotics in front of them continues to speak, were it human she would say it was pontificating.

At her side Doctor Banner says, “Ultron,” looking up towards Stark for confirmation of something but it’s the suit that makes that confirmation. She isn’t going to get the information she usually gets from the behavior of the crazed and megalomaniac from a suit though it is doing a very good impersonation so she turns to the nearest person she can read. Banner is giving off waves of concern and confusion but lower down she sees the beginnings of guilt. He and Stark have done this.

The remaining legionnaires break through the wall. She pushes Banner back over the bar top. He is a civilian, unarmed and untrained unless he turns green and there is no scenario in which he turns green here that will benefit them. She falls with a heavy thud onto his chest after she throws herself forward with the next repulsor shot. Clint and Steve would have known to move. Banner looks up dazed and mutters an apology. She doesn’t have time for this. “Don’t turn green!” she insists before righting herself and pulling a glock from the holster attached to the underneath of the bar.

They have scattered. She hears the reinforced glass of the flooring shatter and someone falls through. Hill is on the floor but armed. Stark has likewise ducked for cover and seems to have grabbed at the nearest weaponizable utensils. She can’t find Cho, Clint or Steve in her quick scan. She fires. The glass behind them leaves them with a wall of potential shrapnel should this ‘Ultron’ and his drones return fire. She needs to relocate Banner to a more defensible position.

“Come!” She tucks him back behind her as she makes a break for the upper mezzanine. There is a defensive wall she can put between herself, Banner and the megalomaniac suit. Banner falls into line ducking behind his own arms as he runs. The sound of Thor’s hammer as it swings through the air and the powering up and concussive blast of the legion’s repulsors fill the room.

Banner is breathing heavily and she pushes him against the black wall, Rogers calls out “Stark!” as the Legionnaires continue to chant, “We are here to help.”

She can almost make out Tony’s response, a mixture of fear and concentration in his voice “One sec.”

But she is definite that Steve cries out again “Thor!” which is followed by a powerful grunt and the slam of metal against metal. With that she is able to place Steve, Tony and Thor in the center melee.

“We are here to help. We are here to help...” She fires again. “We are here to help.” The Legionnaire that has remained the mechanical constant switches its spiel to “It's unsafe. It's unsafe. It's unsafe.” Tell me about, she thinks, and she draws again firing at the nearest legionnaire before Stark falls to the floor in her peripheral vision.
“Cap!” a familiar voice calls out and she know the sound of the Steve’s shield spinning through air even over the ringing in her own ears. It is a sound as relieving as the voice that proceeded it.

With the final metallic crash she expects the silence that usually comes at the end of a fight leaving you with only the sound of hair cells vibrating with the lack of stimuli. Instead the ‘Ultron’ voice asserts itself. “That was dramatic! I'm sorry, I know you mean well. You just didn't think it through. You want to protect the world, but you don't want it to change.” She clocks each of their party. No one is badly hurt, she turns back to Banner. He looks away from her instantly. “How is humanity saved if it's not allowed to…” it continues, “evolve?”

The broken legionnaire with its skeletal face plate reaches down picking up a severed torso of their former foes. “With these? These puppets?” It crushes the head, it sparks wildly for an instant. Stark has collapsed on the stairs. “There's only one path to peace: The Avengers' extinction.” The ominous voice is suddenly shut down by Thor’s hammer.

Banner, beside her, draws in a ragged breath. Her glock is warm in her hand, Clint is standing on the opposite side of the room he appears unharmed. The metal monster’s eyes flicker with light and it begins to sing, “I had strings, but now I'm free.” Natasha shivers. Disney songs never fail to raise goose flesh along her arms. Many, many years ago they formed a part of something dark that she never quite remembers.

“Tasha,” Clint says at her elbow. His voice is soft, unheard by anyone else yet he approached unnoticed.

“Mmm,” she answers not looking up from the computer screen. Her algorithm is mapping a path of search and destroy in front of her eyes. It is more like a biological virus than anything technological she has ever seen, hollowing out data points and then using them as a shell for its own replication.

“I got you some clothes. No reason to be all dolled up now.”

“Thanks, I’ll…” She looks down, in her hand is a familiar grey hoodie. She smiles tightly. Clint’s expression remains fixed, he is a hawk in the sky. “Maria, Cho?”

Maria was bleeding, small bloody track marks left on the floor like bread crumbs leading them here to the lab. Clint nods once, “Yeah, went for the med kit.”

“When?”

“You were busy,” he says tersely. Everything that has been said since the fight has been, in various ways, terse. “Maria, one of my sweaters?” he calls across the lab.

“I’ll stick with the jacket.”

“Kay.” Clint looks down at the supple blue sweater in his hand and back up to the Doctor curled in on herself near Maria, “Dr Cho? Feeling cold? I got the med kit.”

She slips behind the nearest doorway pulling pants on under her dress as she hears Cho’s softly stuttered response, “Thank you… ah… I”

She zips his grey hoodie and takes one deep breath to ready herself.

Colonel Rhodes shoulder should be forced back into its socket with an acceptable amount of muscle relaxant. He is pacing, one hand holding the limp arm hard against his body.

“Dr Cho?” Maria says after a moment to the kneeling woman.
“Y yes?”

“I think my hands are steadier at the moment,” Maria’s hands cover the doctor’s slipping the tweezers from her shaky grasp, “I’ll take over.”

“But I…” Helen Cho offers but her certainty is absent and Natasha knows why James Rhodes has forgone the doctor’s skilled care.

“It’s glass,” Maria says not unkindly, a tone she only uses with civilians. “Nothing I can’t take care of.”

The panel she has been working out of lets off a ping and she steps closer to see what else has been disappeared into the ether. Stark is staring at the shell that was the Ultron program since he man handled it into the lab as though he could piece together the error and twist a screw driver until the crazy returned to sanity. To her left Rogers has not moved radiating a brand of righteous fury he has made entirely his own.

“All our work is gone,” Banner says, always too willing to be the harbinger of doom. “Ultron cleared out, used the internet as an escape hatch.”

“Ultron,” Rogers echoes like the very name of it offends him with its stupidity.

“He's been in everything. Files, surveillance,” she leans back against the work bench. “Probably knows more about us than we know about each other.” Clint shifts against the railing he is standing at. She looks up at him, watches the tiny shift from hawk to panic no one else would catch. She shakes her head very slightly, hoping to convey that the information Stark’s crazed program seemed most interested in was not them at all. It was almost as if Clint Barton and Natasha Romanoff barely registered as a threat. She could use that, she had always used that to her benefit.

Rhodes is talking, she has missed most of what he has said focused instead on her hawk, “… little more exciting?”

“Nuclear codes,” Maria finishes.

“Nuclear codes.” Rhodes agrees, “Look, we need to make some calls, assuming we still can.”

“Nukes?” Natasha asks not entirely sure it fits with this modus operandi, “He said he wanted us dead.”

“He didn't say dead,” Rogers corrects, “He said extinct.”

Clint is pacing, looking for a pattern, “He also said he killed somebody.”

Maria looks up from her injured foot and gives Clint an incredulous look, “There wasn't anyone else in the building.”

“Yes there was,” Stark speaks for the first time since the fight began. With a flick of the pad in his hands a holographic projection illuminates the center of the lab.

Bruce walks towards it his hands spread like he is wanting to cradle computer code like you would a dead child, “This is insane.”

“Jarvis was the first line of defense. He would've shut Ultron down, it makes sense.” Rogers is pragmatic and focused on the tactics but Stark’s shoulders draw forward as though Rogers’ words have been a fist aimed at his chest.
“No, Ultron could've assimilated Jarvis. This isn't strategy, this is...rage.” She watches Banner closely. He doesn’t drop his hands. He is horrified by the rage a machine could manufacture.

None of them register Thor’s arrival until Clint calls out, “Whoa, whoa, whoa!” Thor, striding god like across the floor, reaches Stark lifting him off the ground with ease. “It's going around,” Clint finishes.

“Come on,” Stark groans, he seems to be trying too hard to be Tony Stark, “Use your words, buddy.”

“I have more than enough words to describe you, Stark.”

“Thor! The Legionnaire.” It's Rogers unspoken order that lets Stark live another day.

He stumbles backwards as Thor reports, “Trail went cold about a hundred miles out but it's headed north, and it has the scepter.” They have all fallen into line behind Steve Rogers. She is not sure when or how it happened but even an alien god reports like an enlisted man. “Now we have to retrieve it, again.”

She frowns. “The genie's out of that bottle. Clear and present is Ultron.”

Dr Helen Cho who they have all ignored in some form, suddenly interrupts, “I don't understand. You built this program. Why is it trying to kill us?”

Into the hollow left by the question Tony begins to laugh, the laugh that leaks out of people when faced with death. She has seen people cry, beg and scream at the end of a gun but there is nothing so uneasy as this sound, the grave laughter, the funeral laughter, the helpless hysterical laughter of a select few who instead of fearing leave what is left of their minds far behind. Banner is shaking his head only centimeters trying in vain to stop his friend from marching himself to the bonfire Thor will gladly light for him.

“You think this is funny?”

“No. It's probably not, right?” Stark can’t get rid of the faint wheezing laughter and the almost spastic smirk it leaves on his features, “Is this very terrible? Is it so...is it so...it is. It's so terrible.”

“This could've been avoided if you hadn't played with something you don't understand.”

“No!” Stark says, his voice abruptly that of Tony Stark, the smartest guy in the room, the hysteria falls from him as he strides up to meet the much taller Thor, “I'm sorry. I'm sorry. It is funny. It's a hoot that you don't get why we need this.”

“Tony, maybe this might not be the time to...” Banner tries.

“Really?!” Stark rounds on his friend, “That's it? You just roll over, show your belly, every time somebody snarls.”

Banner’s eyebrows are raised and even he appears to have lost any need to protect Stark from himself, “Only when I've created a murder bot.”

“We didn't. We weren't even close. Were we close to an interface?”

“Well, you did something right. And you did it right here.” Rogers voice cuts through everything, his arms are folded across his chest, “The Avengers were supposed to be different than SHIELD.”
“Anybody remember when I carried a nuke through a wormhole?” Stark continues to dig. Natasha can’t help but roll her eyes. Across the lab, Clint looks tiredly at the floor, collapsing down onto his forearms resting on the railing.

“No, it's never come up,” Rhodes says one of the few people willing to banter with the person everyone else would quite willingly abandon here and now.

“Saved New York?”

“Never heard that.”

“Recall that? A hostile alien army came charging through a hole in space,” Stark gestures upwards, “We're standing three hundred feet below it.” He pauses briefly and Natasha wonders if he has burnt out his grandstanding, “We're the Avengers. We can bust arms dealers all the live long day, but, that up there? That's...that's the end game. How were you guys planning on beating that?”

“Together.”

“We'll lose,” Stark throws back at Rogers.

“Then we'll do that together, too.” Stark looks at him for a moment as though he will be able to catch the moment when uncertainty slips out from under the mask of Captain America. It is a losing battle, one she has fought too many times. Stark turns away bitterly, he knows it will not slip, Steve Rogers is not like them, the pragmatists, the ones who do what needs to be done, the sin eaters. “Thor's right,” Rogers continues. Perhaps he knows that it is his certainty and honor they follow, perhaps he imagines them all as good as he is, she might never know, “Ultron's calling us out. And I'd like to find him before he's ready for us. The world's a big place. Let's start making it smaller.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for continuing to read.

I've been mostly adding to the baby fic in the Starbucks series of late but this series is not forgotten and in fact is kind of my favorite, as these are as close as I can get to the MCU Clint and Natasha I first fell in love with. I hope you all are planning to continue with me as I try to fix AOU or at least the problems I had with it.

If you comment you are a wonder, no really, without comments I curl up a little and cry. But if you read and enjoyed I love you even if you can't comment or kudos. Thank you!
“Barton…”

Clint looks up, “I’ve got some off the grid contacts,” he offers, “Might be worth a favor or two.”

“Good,” Rogers nods, “Then bunk down.”

“Cap?” Clint’s left hand stops in the action searching out his phone and drops limply to his side.

“Natasha, Stark and Hill will be going through what’s left of our computerized resources. Get some rest.”

“Rest,” Clint says flatly, he nods once at the order Rogers gives him.

Rogers continues on without acknowledging the agreement, “Doctor Banner, can you take me through what the Ultron program was supposed to achieve?”

“Certainly, Captain.” Bruce pushes his glasses up his nose. His eyes dart once to Stark who has returned to staring at the former Ultron legionnaire before he begins his monotone listing of objectives and prototype failures.

Hill makes eye contact across the lab before placing the tweezers down on a nearby work top and sliding a pad towards herself. Her injured foot remains resting on her knee. She gestures to Thor and Natasha assumes that Hill will take down as much of the trajectory of the scepter stealing bot from him as possible.

She catches Clint before he leaves the lab, “Clint.”

“I’ll make my calls,” he says scratching at the back of his neck. In his hand is a cell that isn’t connected to him in anyway, its encryption is a little bug of her own devising, the only reason he would ditch it would be to ditch her. She’d gifted it to him when she’d brought him back from Sokovia the first time.

“Are you?” she asks still fixated with the innocuous looking phone.

“I’m fine,” he offers up a half smile, “Big Bad wasn’t interested in me in the least.”

She folds her arms again sneering at the program who against all odds inherited the worst of its father’s vices, “Hubris.”

His eyes close as he replies, “Algorithm responding to threat level.”

“Clint…”

“They need you, Nat.” He grins, eyes opened and taps his fist against her shoulder. “Wake me if you need relieving or if…” He shrugs then unable to finish the thought.

“I’ll wake you when you’re needed,” she says firmly.

“Kay,” he shrugs again, he yields but stops short of believing her. He taps at the phone screen as he
leaves. She doesn’t turn to watch him go.

His room is dark, it lets her give in to her exhaustion a fraction more. When she pushes down the light switch on the bedside lamp, casting its semi-circle of orange light over the bed, she is relieved to find him splayed across the quilt cover with one sock hanging from his toes. “Clint.”

He moves quickly, flipping on to his back and rubbing the pads of his hands over his face as he sits up, “Nat? We got a lead?”

“Not yet,” she sits next to him, unzipping her boots, “Rhodes has gone back to the Pentagon, we got Cho back to Seoul on a commercial flight just in case.” She pushes her fingertips into the base of her occipital bone, forcing knots in her neck to give. “Hill is ‘liaising’ with the intelligence agencies…”

“Off books?” his asks behind her.

“Off books. No one wants the whole world in free fall just yet.”

Clint’s hands move over the top of hers, warmer than her own, she lets her hands drop and he massages down the long line of muscle to her shoulders. “Avengers create own enemy who wants them extinct. News at 11,” he says dryly.

“Not a headline that will play well,” she says pushing back into his hands. His callouses are rough and his pressure firm, she’d groan if she was any more asleep.

“There’s ripples already. My contacts have gone dark.”

She turns in his hands to look at him over her shoulder, “Scum is always a weather vane for these kinds of storms.”

His hands stop moving and she can tell that he is trying to keep his expression blank. It is a decision that is telling in and of its self. “You sleeping here?” he asks.

“I just need two hours.” She pulls his hoodie back over her head and toes her boots off.

He pushes off from the other side of the bed as she pulls his other pillow into her body. He nods once, “I’ll head up. Grab you in two.”

“Clint,” she yawns as he leans down to switch off the lamp.

“Yeah?”

“I’m glad I’ve got you at my back.”

“Always,” he says, his voice is gravel. She closes her eyes and hears the light click as it is extinguished. She knows his footsteps, knows his gait. He gathers fresh clothing, his toothbrush from the sink and makes his way to the door.

“It is hubris,” she finds herself insisting as he leaves.

“Natasha,” he calls from the doorway.

“Mmm.”

“It’s morning,” Clint says, “Rhodes is gonna call in. You’ll wanna be up for that.”

“Anything else?” she says barely getting her eyes open.
“Hill’s heading over with new information. Pinocchio hasn’t come back or sent us a zodiac letter yet. Maybe he got swallowed by a whale.” He is a silhouette in a doorway but she can imagine the grin that tugs at his lips with that terrible joke. She shields her eyes from the thin, murky light coming through the curtains and swings her legs off the edge of the bed. “A guy can dream,” he adds when she doesn’t respond. “Stark didn’t go down at all, working on something computery all night. Thor’s getting Banner.”

“No JARVIS,” she says with the realization.

“No JARVIS,” he agrees.

Rhodes looks just as tired even in the military blues. Stark interrupts the call. He is more animated than he’s been since his rant the night before. Despite the self-imposed vow of silence he tells Rhodes about the software he has been working on for the War Machine suit and she begs off. Clint is pacing outside the room they’ve set up headquarters in. Leather jacket, hoodie, shirt, he is cold again. The short shake of his head that he gives when he pulls the phone from his ear tells her that his contacts are still dark and useless.

“Nice sweat shirt.”

“Yeah?” he raises an eyebrow, “Someone got it all stretched out.”

“Rhodes say the nuclear codes are being changed faster than Stark’s Ultron can access them.”

He frowns, running the possibilities in his head, “We got someone on our side?”

“Be nice for a change,” she sighs, “The dreams?”

“Tasha,” he says warning her off the way she scans him.

“You got some sleep?” she relents. She brings her gaze back up to his face and does not question how dark the shadows are beneath his eyes. Clint scans the floor below, the doorway to their left and throws a quick glance back into the makeshift office. She wants to reach out for his hand and test it for temperature, pulse and perspiration. She steps closer as he steps back.

“Yeah,” he replies tonelessly, “All recharged should you need my skill set.”

“Clint…” Ястреб.

“Barton, Romanoff,” Rogers says. They turn in tandem. “Might have something.”

“I’ll go,” Natasha says, she brushes past him on the way to her computer console.

Rogers’s brisk voice carries, “What was that about?”

Clint shakes his head slightly, “My girlfriend problems,” he grunts out.

She watches Rogers frown and dismiss Clint’s answer, “Any of your old contacts come through?”

“Still waitin’.”

“Wait faster,” Rogers orders and marches through the doorway. As he approaches her work space he looks down at a pad before passing it to Thor who looks at it with the same disgust and impatience he has been throwing at Stark over the course of the night.

“What’s this?” Stark asks and receives a pad at full force slammed into his chest.
“A message,” Steve answers. “Ultron killed Strucker.”

“And he did a Banksy at the crime scene, just for us.”

Natasha takes the pad from Stark and scowls at the crime scene photo, “This is a smokescreen. Why send a message when you’ve just given a speech?”

Steve picks up her thought and runs with it, leaning back slightly as he posits, “Strucker knew something that Ultron wanted us to miss.”

She nods, quickly pulling up directories on the key pad, “Yeah, I bet he...” The computer screen flashes and then the irritating warning ‘record deleted’ appears across everything she’s hoping to access. “Everything we had on Strucker has been erased.”

Bruce is peering over her shoulder, he still looks half asleep, his curly hair separated by tossing and turning. His body heat almost that of a slumbering child pulled from the quilts of his bed.

“Not everything,” Stark offers turning towards the room where Clint and Thor have begun stacking boxes of old hard copy files. Busy work, Clint had described it as with the touch of self-pity not entirely absent from his voice.

Thor begins by flinging box lids across the room, not a few of them directed at Tony Stark. It is a kind of petulant behavior that she expects more of his adoptive brother than of the god but then she has never known a ‘prince’ to deal with frustration well.

She and Clint take opposite sides of the room flicking through the files closest, they watch the others silently.

“Known associates. Well, Strucker had a lot of friends,” Steve says his own files in hand.

Bruce looks as if he has been asked to eat monkey brains, “Well, these people are all horrible.”

Stark despite whatever disagreements they may have had is holding close to Banner. She concedes this may be an act of self-defense as Thor continues to treat him as a chew toy. Suddenly Stark’s voice interrupts the general disgust for Strucker, “Wait. I know that guy.” He points to the file in Banner’s hand before Banner passes him the photo he had flicked to, “From back in the day. He operates off the African coast, black market arms.” Steve’s face hardens as he throws an accusing look at Stark, “There are conventions, alright? You meet people,” Stark continues, “I didn't sell him anything. He was talking about finding something new, a game changer, it was all very 'Ahab.'”

They group around Stark’s file on his ‘Ahab’. She watches Clint’s eyes dart back and forth and knows he is more concerned with the interplay of this team than the file in Stark hand. Thor reaches out and slams a meaty finger onto the image of Ulysses Klaue, “This,” he demands succinctly.

“Uh, it's a tattoo. I don't think he had it...”

“No, those are tattoos, this is a brand,” Thor says through a tight jaw and a clear wish to pick Tony Stark up by the throat again.

Banner scuttles to the computer and it seems to Natasha it is possibly an excuse to get out from between Tony and the ever imposing Thor. She looks back at Clint, silently communicating the wish that they were not currently buried beneath the avalanche of man posturing and passive and not so passive aggression they currently are. Banner begins scanning in the image of the brand and the computer starts its semiotic search skimming through a database of similar symbols until it is able to identify the brand on Klaue's neck.
Clint’s face has shut down, sniper like he doesn’t react to her roll of the eyes. She stares for moment watching him scan the room before she looks down at the rest of the file on Stark’s black market arms dealer.

“Oh, yeah.” Banner calls as he gets a hit, “It’s a word in an African dialect meaning thief,” he looks back at them with the computer screen still reflecting in his glasses, “in a much less friendly way.”

“What dialect?” Steve asks.

“Wakanada...? Wa...Wa...Wakanda.”

Rogers and Stark freeze, a palpable and disconcerting fear seems to descend upon them both, “If this guy got out of Wakanda with some of their trade goods...” Stark says first.

“I thought your father said he got the last of it?” Rogers replies his voice hushed as though it will keep whatever it is they fear from coming to fruition.

“I don't follow. What comes out of Wakanda?” Banner says asking plainly when her instinct is to let them talk and reveal more than they intended.

“The strongest metal on earth.”

“Where is this guy now?” Rogers sneers.

“Africa.”

“Big place,” Clint smirks from his corner.

“Gee thanks, Barton,” Stark replies snarkily, “He used to set up on the coast. South.”

“Got it,” she says sharply. “It’s in the file,” she continues, answering Stark’s unasked question efficiently, “Clint, you can get us here without raising any eyebrows?”

Clint scans the coordinates and then narrows his eyes slightly before nodding once, “We’re good.”

“Wheels up in 30,” Steve says, “Get your gear.”

Chapter End Notes

Hopefully I can get you all to the farm house of Clintasha destruction before Christmas... hopefully. Thank you again for the wonderful comments and support. And I continue to want to hear what you think, what you hate and maybe what you love so that we can fix this thing together.

As always each comment is individually loved and fed small chocolate truffles.
I have no place in the world

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She is the first other than Banner and Thor to be ready. Most of her armory is built into her suit and the Quinjet is stocked with her ammunition. Banner is hunched in a chair outside the lab, trying not to be seen listening to Thor as he speaks to someone who can only be Dr Jane Foster.

He sees her watching and winces a little, “It’s hard not to hear him, even when he’s whispering. His voice carries.”

“Apparently the last time he went into battle without calling she slapped him.”

“He learns quickly then.”

“Truly he is a god among men.”

Bruce glances up from the floor, “Tony’s still in the lab. He hasn’t called Pepper.”

“Hardly surprising.” She shrugs.

“You’d think…” his voice, concerned, trails off mid-sentence. Bruce stops himself, corrects and then makes eye contact. "Last thing he did before he blacked out in the wormhole… call Pepper.”

She is not patient enough to soothe the doctor's worries about Stark. She isn't here to mother them, she isn't here to force Stark to face his trauma or to absolve Banner of his collusion. They are all monstrous in one way or another. She is the only woman but they shouldn't look to her for some kind of balm from the horror of that. “The wormhole was not his fault.”

“I’m not sure Ultron is entirely his fault either… he had, we had good intentions, Natasha.” She shouldn’t still feel so surprised by these supposed adults inability to hide their minor hurts.

“And you paved our road with them," her right eyebrow jerks upwards, "Doctor."  

Bruce pauses. Natasha takes the moment to reflect that perhaps she should not be as harshly honest as she is with Clint with the rest of this team. Unlike Fury, Hill and Barton these people have only ever seen versions of Natasha made easier for public consumption.

“Maybe I should…” he covers for the shock, "that is..."  

Clint interrupts before Bruce can stammer out another excuse, “Nat, Bruce, I’m going to start the pre-flight checks,” he calls across the room, "You ready?"

“I’ll check on Tony.” Banner draws himself out of the chair like he is grateful for the escape route.

Clint Barton, master of providing escape routes, mouths a silent 'what?' at her and turns on his heels.

Even without the reassuring voice of Stark's AI, butler, sponsor, best friend, Stark Tech has enough oomph to provide them with projected lay outs. Clint grunts his version of a declined RSVP as she unstraps herself from the seat behind him to meet with the Captain over holograms and strategies.

She narrows in on an easily ignored port side entry route, “I suggest Barton and I enter the facility from here.” She hovers a hastily unvarnished nail over a point in the air.
“If Ultron is there,” Rogers frowns, “it will leave you both vulnerable. He will have superior fire power by now.”

“She’s saying Tony’s metal love child doesn’t give a ‘curse word’ about where I am,” Clint calls out. His eyes don’t leave the skyline.

“She,” she answers refusing to alter her tone to rise to whatever bait Barton is tossing out now, “is saying that the assassins are better at exploiting the assumptions in Tony’s programming than just shooting things.”

Rogers’ eyes scour the map looking for some impossible error in her reasoning. His arms are so tightly crossed that she wonders fleetingly if it would be possible for him to break his own ribs.

“Barton?”

“If extincto-tron is on site, Widow and I have a better chance of getting the twins isolated with the big guns distracting him.”

“Klaue will have his own mini-militia. It’s how these guys operate,” Stark offers, still downcast, he pulls himself together long enough to roll his eyes at the Captain’s clenched jaw, ”You learn a thing or two about it trying to plug the holes in the distribution chain.”

“Romanoff, Barton? You think you can close down Klaue’s defenses?”

“Yes,” they answer in unison despite Clint’s back to the proceedings. Stark manages a smirk.

“Isolate the twins if you can. They could still be brought round.”

“And if we can’t?”

“That’s a bridge we will cross when and if we come to it, Romanoff.”

She bites back the response that bridges come a lot quicker than he ever expects them to. The men lean in.

"Thor, we can take this entry point. Stark, enter from here. Circle back to this point. Ultron will need to come through here if he's carrying anything."

"See you there, Newhart."

"What is this Newhart?” Thor growls back at Stark.

Banner answers from his seat, "A TV program nominated for awards consistently but never won, I take it a code green is not expected, Captain?"

"Not expected. Possibly required. We'll be on Comms, stay alert."

"You try me, Stark. Do not begin what you cannot finish."

"You know what, Thunder Thi..."

The jet tips violently, throwing Thor backwards and Stark forward his right hand flicking palm forward and aglow with repulsor fire. Rogers stays upright, superior reflexes pushing his left leg behind him and his arms out wide before he can tumble back into the bulkhead with the angry God.

Natasha falls back heavily onto a knee but is pulling herself up to search the screen for any sign of
danger as Clint yells over a shoulder, "Sorry, turbulence."

Thor’s hammer makes metallic contact with the bench as he glowers across the flight deck. Rogers throws a sharp shake of his head towards him and then begins pulling the harness over his shoulders. Thor follows suit.

"Turbulence?" she says dryly, leaning down over Clint’s console.

His voice is low and he does not bring his eyes back from his course, "You want Cap to give his ‘together’ speech again?"

"Clint."

"You might want to strap yourself in there, Romanoff. No telling when we could hit another pocket."

"Not over," she hisses back.

"Never is."

Clint goes left, she goes right. She can hear the echo of Ultron’s voice, the disgust reverberates and men scatter in the bowels of the ship. It stinks of days old bilge water.

“Ahh, Junior,” Stark is clear over the Comm. Stark’s repulsors cut out and he lands with the telltale clank of metal against metal, “You’re gonna break your old man's heart.”

She is listening to the feed as she turns round the next unguarded corner. This militia isn't looking for them or even particularly good at their jobs. Ultron as she predicted has not sent legionnaires to search for them or to keep Klaue’s men at bay.

“You two can still walk away from this.” Steve Roger’s voice is overly earnest in her ear.

She is close enough now to hear the catty response from the female enhanced, “Oh, we will.”

“I know you've suffered,” Steve says, taking exactly the wrong tact with a bitter child in desperate need of proving she is not a victim.

“Ugggghhhhh,” the Ultron voice moans, “Captain America. God's righteous man, pretending you could live without a war.” He knows us, she thinks, he knows more than Rogers would want him to know. He is playing us, finding the entry points, pushing on the weakest welds. The robot continues on with it's Starkesque quipping, “I can't physically throw up in my mouth, but...

“If you believe in peace, then let us keep it,” Thor proclaims. Natasha hugs the wall.

“I think you're confusing peace with quiet.”

Thankfully, Stark interrupts, “Yuh-huh. What's the Vibranium for?”

“I'm glad you asked that, because I wanted to take this time to explain my evil plan!” Ultron pontificates before the blast she associates with Stark’s suits wrenches the fetid air.

The clang of hammer and shield ring out as Legionnaires follow Ultron’s lead into the center storage bay of the ship. She almost misses the South African accented voice that calls out closer, "All of them!"
“Move! Move! Move!” another voice orders and she turns to the stampeding footfalls. And here is our militia for hire, she thinks as she throws a punch and then swings around the first man to grab her.

It’s a din, a wall of noise in the tin can of an unseaworthy ship, but as her assailant’s head connects with the rusted bulkhead the hail of arrows begins.

“Thor! Status?” Rogers’ orders over the Comm. She ducks from the gun fire.

“The girl tried to warp my mind.” She loses part of the feed as a mercenary falls forward, his weapon skidding across the floor and he screams at the arrow lodged in his side. “...human could keep her at bay. Fortunately,” Thor sounds strangely relaxed, his words falling away, “I am mighty.”

She wipes the sweat from her eyes and reloads before launching back into the fray. Men are running towards the exits. The last of the legionnaires falls from above. The ground shifts.

“Whoever’s standing we gotta….”

The rail turns from cool metal to wood scarred with the indentation of finger nails, hundreds of long dead girls pushing their fear down into wood as though someone might feel their mark and remember they lived. Natasha wordlessly carries on, her fingers glide over the marks. No one remembers you lived. You stopped living the moment you feared on this staircase. Nameless girls, echoes in scratched wood, not good enough to be remembered. Through full length glass windows, slightly thicker at the bottom. She remembers. She sees. There is a subtle warping of the images beyond, the light bends a little more. If you need to break the glass, Natalia, where must you hit? If you mean to hide behind glass, Natalia, where is best? Young girls, perfect in synchronicity, draw themselves upwards on broken toes and callouses.

“Again!”

English.

English, French, Italian, Hungarian.

You must leap and bleed and twirl and kill in all the languages, Natalia.

The music sounds like it is playing through water. The little girls, soft and voiceless, huddle in pinafores watching as the older girls follow commands spat into their expressionless faces.

She refocuses pulling her reflection off the glass so that she does not so easily find the new ones who will be dead within the year.

“You’ll break them,” she says.

“Only the breakable ones,” Madame B answers. The girls dance on. Their fingers curl forward like the hands of bodies burning. “You are made of marble.”

Stainless steel and the cheapest fabric against her skin. The rhythm of elderly casters in ancient wheels beneath her. Pain, the most intimate of pains.

“We’ll celebrate after the graduation ceremony.” The music repeats. The ballerinas are unaffected by the sharp pain that beats at her temple.

“What if I fail?” It seems that the words taste wrong in her mouth. They were Russian. They are English.
The grip of her gun, the kick as it fires, the dust in the air from the paper target exploding at the point of impact, the whimper of the paper target waiting…the hessian over the bulls-eyes… the way the target cannot help but…

Will I die quickly? Would you give me that even as a failure? If she fails now she makes a choice even if that choice is to die.

Dark blue paper targets, crying out for mercy.

“You never fail,” the reflection of Madame says, her lips the perfect shade of red.

Paper targets unable to speak and the slide action of her gun.

She kicks back but his arms close in around her throat, meaty biceps press against her neck. She pushes up. She taps madly at his left arm, no longer hot and fleshy around her but scaled and cool.

“Sloppy,” Madame says. Her partner’s arm is made of metal. His face is blank. It reminds her to never let her thoughts show on the movements and color of her face. “Pretending to fail.”

He is gone. Madame stands too close. “The ceremony is necessary for you to take your place in the world.”

Breathe Natalia, it was never a choice. The girls dance. Breathe Natalia, stand straight. “I have no place in the world.”

Her eyes sting. Her chest raises and falls. I will never panic again, she silently promises.

“Exactly.”

I will not scream. The hand covers her mouth. Each girl that comes here is silenced forever.

How can you be anything to anyone if you are not nothing to begin with, Natalia? You are not Natalia. You are a weapon. The girls in braids and pinafores do not need the mouths they have taken.

No place, no person, for the glory of...

"Nat. Tasha? Tash? Come back to me, Natasha."

Chapter End Notes

I am so sorry for the delay in this chapter. I let my life, or lack thereof, get in the way. I will try to do better. I suspect I let general life events and a sudden decline in bookmarks convince me that no one really wanted to read this anyway. Perhaps a good mindset to be in when you are writing about believing you have no place in the world but definitely not one that actually makes you write. Thank you if you’ve been hanging on hoping to see how AOU without that stupid Beauty and the Beast thing might resolve here. You
really are wonderful.
He goes left, she goes right. He goes up, she goes down.

It is reassuring in a way, that even with all the aliens and super heroics there are still rusted out uncommissioned villain lairs that stink of rotting fish and meth sweat. This is his comfort zone, a hive of scum and villainy.

He misses the silence on his Comm and he never thought he’d think that. Natasha was never much for the chatter. If shit went down he’d hear about it but otherwise he got a faint but positive echo of her breath and the words she spoke to other men. This team, Avengers, never stopped talking. It was really cutting into his ‘thing’, you know?

Ultron and his two Branch Davidian wannabes must already be here, Klaue’s men are scattering. One floor up, he comes up behind a sweat covered mercenary type trying obliviously to suck the most out of a hand rolled cigarette. A sleeper hold later, shit tobacco is the least of his worries. He leaves him unconscious, stomps out the butt as he climbs the next bare bones stair way. Last thing they need is for a spark to catch on that methaney smell welling up from the bottom of Klaue’s shipquarters.

Stark’s voice is always sharper than the rest but with an odd reverb. His suit clanks against the metal scaffolding and Clint hears him, “You’re gonna break your old man’s heart.”

"If I have to.” The response comes through like a chorus, the metal man’s answer ringing out through the ship and the weaker version passed through Cap and Thor’s Comms.

“We don’t have to break anything,” Thor intones, like he didn’t get the memo that the ‘bot was a complete nut bar.

“Clearly you’ve never made an omelet.”

“He beat me by one second,” Stark says of Thor ignoring the giant ass problem for the petty competition.

Clint finally reaches a perch where he can get a clear line of sight. Below in the catwalk laced hollow of the ship Cap, Thor and Stark face off against Ultra nut bar and the Lannister twins.

Tracksuit twin, the punk who knocked him down and got him shot, steps forward, “Ah, this is funny, Mr. Stark. It’s what, comfortable? Like old times?”

“This was never my life.”

Rogers tries a different tact, stepping forward and aiming for the girl, “You two can still walk away from this.”

Bad call Cap, Clint thinks, just as ponytail pouts prettily and with her Sokovian accent snaps, “Oh, we will.”

“I know you've suffered.”
Jesus, Rogers, you better be vamping for time. But it does occur to him that Rogers, Stark, Banner, they didn’t drag in Natasha aged all of nineteen, they didn’t see him at twenty two, with a chip on his shoulder the size of the Dorito Cap is shaped like, working for a court martial like it was his god given mission. This team has no idea how the twisty turns of fate and survival can make a kid want to burn anyone who so much as tries to give them sympathy.

“Uuughh!” Stark’s ‘bot says echoing his feelings a little too closely, “Captain America. God's righteous man, pretending you could live without a war.” Even at this distance, Clint reckons that Cap looks a tiny bit like he’s been slapped. “I can't physically throw up in my mouth, but...”

“If you believe in peace, then let us keep it.”

“I think you're confusing peace with quiet.”

Thankfully, Stark interrupts the quip off, “Yuh-huh. What's the Vibranium for?”

“I'm glad you asked that, because I wanted to take this time to explain my evil plan!” Ultron gives up his transparent gesticulating and blasts Stark against the hull.

And it begins.

Rogers and Thor swing with hammer and shield as Stark blasts himself back upright and into the metal ass at the other end of the catwalk. The twins move quickly, tracksuit all but vanishes as Legionnaires descend on the melee. And then the remaining idiots of fortune jump in. He looses three arrows into the mess. It’s more of a bar fight with gunfire than a battle.

One, two, three hits, maybe, and Stark and Ultron are up and heading for the roof. He can track speedy through the mess by the path he creates. He decides not to fire into the space he calculates the kid will be next. Clint braces his knee against the metal balcony and draws and fires again and again ignoring the machine gun fire coming from where Natasha was headed.

Tracksuit materializes with his hand around Mjolnir which, tricky tool that it is, dumps him on the lower level. Clint grins. Stark and Ultron shoot upwards and as the last of the legionnaires start to lose their heads and limbs, he can hear the crackle of static with only one clear word “Green?”

“Thor! Status?” Cap orders from the lowest level.

He takes out another mercenary.

“The girl tried to warp my mind. Take special care, I doubt a human could keep her at bay,” Thor says tossing a mercenary into the wall. Clint fires into the group Natasha is tussling with.

“Fortunately,” Thor continues like he’d just taken a hit of mary jane, “I am mighty.”

Thor turns a corner and disappears out of Clint’s line of sight. Cap goes down hard with Speedy Gonzales and then the twins are gone again.

One more ratatat of gunfire and he decides that he’s had enough of this, the chatter on the Comm has gone eerily silent. He draws the sonic arrow. It beeps its power up sequence. There are foot steps behind him, a shift in the air. He looses the arrow and down the remaining men fall.

One breath. Draw. Snap.

She squeals her inhale, the electromagnetic signals causing sudden spasticity. Her eyes shift from red to her natural brown.
“I’ve done the whole mind control thing. Not a fan.”

She’ll fall and fall hard if he doesn’t remove the arrow. Even with too much eyeliner and the venomous little asides, up close she’s just a messed up kid trying to hurt the world for hurting her, trying to save it so no one else gets hurt and not doing either particularly well. Just a messed up kid with frightened eyes and his arrow attached to her forehead.

He reaches for the girl and the arrow, but tracksuit is yelling and he is down with glass slicing into his back just like old times. The boy picks eyeliner up and glares down at him like he’d brought her home late from a date at the drive in. Clint is sure he’s going for something more menacing but Clint could tell him few things about how menacing men really look. They tend to smile a whole lot more than you expect them to, and then the smile gets really off putting. The twins are gone before he can provide this particular lesson.

“Yeah, you better run,” he sighs heaving himself off the ground. They always make sure he lands right on his quiver.

“No one answers.

He makes for Natasha.

His knee is bitching at him but he runs anyway. He passes Klaue’s men, disoriented and injured, as he makes his way through the warren of rusty beams and leaking pipes. They barely notice him, less interested in fighting now than keeping their own blood inside their own bodies. He’d take a fight with a trained mercenary over a barely trained zealot any day. Mercenaries know when the odds make no sense.

In the center of the ship and on the catwalks, where the fighting was concentrated, a few more idiots are stirring, their hands going to their heads before their eyes open. The ringing in their ears won’t be going anywhere anytime soon.

The team isn’t talking, he can hear Stark throwing instructions at his AI but it isn’t important enough for him to pay close attention to.

He finds her collapsed in a stair well, hugging a banister, her eyes seeing something he will never see. He searches her for injuries. Her knuckles are grazed but there is no sign of bleeding or of head injuries. He runs his hand up the back of her neck, into her hair, it comes away clean. No blood. Still she gapes at him. Her eyes are unfocused and terrified. He can’t help bringing his hands up to cup her cheeks. Where ever that little piece of work sent her, he knows it’s bloody and wrong.

“Nat. Tasha? Tash?” he says, his voice croaking out the plea, “Come back to me, Natasha.”

“The Avengers? Team? Anybody? I could really use some help right about now,” Stark says over the line, “Banner’s not going beddy byes this time.”

He pulls his hands away, looping her arm over his shoulder. “Well, that’s not gonna happen. Not for a while.” She lets him, floppy like a doll, her mouth tracing silent Russian phrases. He pulls her up with him. “The whole team is down, you got no back up here.”

“I’m calling in Veronica,” Stark replies. Clint doesn’t ask who the hell Veronica is, he doesn’t ask where the Hulk is smashing. Natasha’s cheek is cold against his shoulder.

He finds Rogers in among the crap piled in the center of the ship, his helmet is cast aside and he is trying to stand.
“Go to sleep, go to sleep, go to sleep!” Stark is yelling in his Comm. Clint wishes he could pull the damn thing out, he still needs it to locate Thor.

“Cap! Come on, Man. You’re super and shit,” he says, leaning Natasha down on to a stair. “Shake it off.” The Captain shakes his head like he’s trying to look sober for a bouncer.

Eventually he takes Clint’s hand damn near pulling the thing out of the socket as he rights himself, “Barton? Where is? Uh…”

“I’d give you a minute but we need to hightail it out of here. The arms dealers are gonna want their stuff back soonish.”

“The others?” Rogers rubs his temple and focuses again. “Thor, Stark…”

Clint leaves him standing if rocking back on his feet. He goes back to Natasha, put his hand around her waist, her arm around his shoulder. She squeezes her eyes shut when he hauls her upright.

“Stark has gone after Banner.”

“Damage report,” Stark is screaming in Clint’s ear, he assumes Steve has lost his Comm with his helmet.

“Doesn’t sound like the lullaby worked this time,” he says gesturing to his left ear, “Haven’t found Thor yet but I think he went into nightmare land before either of you.”

“Natasha?”

“I’ve got her,” he says, hard. The Captain blinks.

“Captain, Barton, Natasha,” Thor’s voice carries down from the floor above.

“Right. With the mighty one there, that’s all of us. I wasn’t joking about getting the fuck out of here.”

Natasha lets out a small moan, the first sound he’s heard from her since the fight began.

Thor lands with a heavy thud beside Rogers, his cape worse for wear but trailing regally behind him, “I can take the Lady Natasha back to the Jet.”

“I’ve got her,” he says again.

“Thor can get her back quicker,” Rogers says scanning the debris. There is a loud explosion down the Comm in his left ear. He shakes his head hard.

He almost repeats ‘I’ve got her’ in the tone Coulson was always calling him on, “Thanks high and mighty but I can get her back myself, the girl didn’t get me.”

“Clint,” Steve says frowning, “Thor can get her back.”

Thor’s arms are around Natasha before he can argue the point. Thor lifts her like she weighs nothing and he looks to the massive hole in the ceiling. Natasha’s eyes open, her green eyes focus for one small instant and then Thor is gone vacating the space between the Captain and Clint. The ‘Stay with me’ he wanted to say is still on his lips but he doesn’t flinch, he just stares coldly at the Captain before gesturing to their exit.

He follows the Captain’s double time march back to the jet, the soft wail of sirens serenade their departure. Avengers it seems are always accompanied by a concerto of sirens and flashing lights.
He goes straight to her. She is slumped against the bulkhead but awake and oriented. He ignores Thor’s pacing, the huddled Banner in a blanket who makes no eye contact. He lets Rogers go to Stark to demand his status update but he is focused on her.

“Don’t fuss,” she says when he crouches down beside her.

“Yeah?”

“I’ll be fine. Just get us out of here.”

“Tasha,” he says going for her hands. She moves them away.

“Hawkeye.”

“Fine,” he says unbuckling the side of his tac vest, “Just rest okay. Don’t… you look after you.”

“It’s what I do best,” she says looking back to the wall.

“Somebody else might believe that, Tasha.” He stands. “Not me.”

He gets the jet up and in the air. He does it as gently as possible aware of the bruised and fragile cargo he’s carrying, aware that he only really cares for the one staring blackly into the distance and refusing to be helped. They’re in stealth mode and the night sky is a clear blank canvas for him to shepherd them through.

“… but it's in the air,” Maria Hill is saying on the secure feed.

“Stark Relief Foundation?” Stark asks.

“Already on the scene. How's the team?”

Fucked. Not a team. Full of good intentions and blatant naivety. In a word, fucked.

Stark takes a different tact, his voice is hushed but other than the low hum of the engines it’s the only sound, “Everyone's...we took a hit. We'll shake it off.”

“Well for now I'd stay in stealth mode, and stay away from here.”

“So, run and hide?” Stark asks like that isn’t exactly what they are already doing.

“Until we can find Ultron, I don't have a lot else to offer,” Hill answers calmly. Clint’s team: where the women are cool pragmatists and the men are raging idealists and here he is stuck in the middle like a screen door on a fucking submarine.

“Neither do we,” Stark says and the conversation ends. Clint checks for icing and then looks back to his latitude and longitude. It’s soothing, the routine, the familiarity, the having a purpose here.

“Hey, you wanna switch out?” Stark asks leaning down over his seat.

“No, I'm good. If you wanna get some kip, now's a good time, cause we're still a few hours out.”

“A few hours from where?”

“A safe house.”
Thank you so much for such a positive response to the last chapter and my return from my unintended hiatus. You are all such wonderful and supportive people. How is it possible that you are still willing to read this story? It's just unfathomable. No that isn't me fishing for compliments, really, I promise. But you did boost me up so much that I was able to get the next chapter (a Clint one) done in just one day. I hope you all enjoy it. If you don't let me know. If you do let me know. If you think of another Stark nickname for Thor let me know. If your significant other forgot valentines day let me know. What I am saying is leave a comment because I miss you when you don't. Thank you so much.
The Quinjet lands, it hovers above the ground for a moment, the smooth gears of the wings shifting and sunlight drifting through the cockpit window. Wherever they are it is day. It's the moment when the downward thrust cuts out that makes her shake the replay of fragmented memories loose enough to look up.

Stark with a graze down his left cheek, offers Banner his hand and she watches dazed as he twists away from the proffered hand making no eye contact. A blanket slips from his shoulders and she watches as it falls. She stands. Stark's cheek is painted with reds that become blues at the edges. It picks at the lines of his skin, marking capillaries usually unseen.

Clint, moving faster than the rest of them punches the cargo bay door release. Stark now standing behind him stops abruptly, staring into the dappled haze.

"Hey there." Clint is by her side, wrapping his hand firmly around her waist, letting her rest most of her weight on him. He pulls her forward as the others fall behind.

Like ducklings, she thinks, when he steadies her descent into a green field. Behind them, Stark, Thor with his hammer, Rogers with his shield and further back Banner holding himself, skittish like the runt of Barton's litter.

Her eyes adjust to the sudden light and she looks up to the farmhouse, patchy in its white and green paint work and the newer unpainted wood to replace old and rotted boards.

"Ястреб, нет," she whispers, her English still feels foreign, her tongue rests at the floor of her mouth.

"We need somewhere to lay low."

"Не здесь"

"I made a call," he rumbles lowly, his hand closes a fraction tighter against the curve of her waist and she lets her head drop.

"What is this place?" Thor asks.

"A safe house?" Stark replies, his answer sounding less certain than the question that preceded it.

"Let's hope," Clint offers wryly, ignoring the wave of clenching that passes through his ducklings until it stops at Banner, too exhausted to clench anything. Clint steps up onto the porch. His fingers, warm even through the skin of her suit, wait a second on her hip until he seems certain she no longer needs him to stand, they peel away slowly, a gesture she knows goes unseen.

From a standing position he leaps up, grasping the edge of the guttering and hoists himself up. Despite herself she follows his movements, the moment he hangs, then his feet against the eaves and then the acrobatic push to be standing on the second floor roof tiles. He is not a gymnast, there is little grace with this circus trained man, no care for the elegance between positions only for the drama of the feat itself. Clint carefully raises a roof tile, places it back down and then is by her side again. He has his key.
"Honey, I'm home," he calls as the door opens inwards. He lets her move under her own steam, the team following.

When he turns back his face splits into an open incongruous smile, "Kidding! Your faces." She feels too tired to examine their responses.

"We're good," he placates, "Fury helped me keep this place off SHIELD's files. Almost no one knows about it." His forehead creases as he looks to each of them. "I'd like to keep it that way."

Tony speaks first, "A farm? You're a secret farmer?!" He gestures wildly, "Where did SHIELD find you? A renaissance faire?"

Clint shrugs unfazed, she half expects him to offer 'a circus' with the same lazy disinterest. Everything it appears is now open and laid bare for the team to pick apart. "Look, I inherited… half of this shit box… but it's good enough to regroup in. There's canned goods, beer, root beer. Your standard zombie apocalypse stuff. Running water, a wood burning stove, power's still on…"

"Who else knows about this place?" The Captain asks but it is clear that this is still an order.

"I have a brother, he technically owns the other… " Clint drags his hand through his hair, she watches dust falling from it in the sunlight, unable to focus on Clint's explanation. "He passes through sometimes… Barney isn't much for Christmas cards. Carnies aren't known for their record keeping. Ol' Ultron's not gonna find this place through him."

"Fury knew," Rogers says darkly.

"Chickens," Stark interrupts, "there is a chicken!"

Thor appears to be transfixed by the sideboard across the room, housing mismatched plates, cups, and a washed out photograph of a young family in a rusty metal frame. She knows this picture, it's place on the shelf, the dust that points to it's immovability. She knows the faces of the two skinny boys, one tow headed, the other a kind of ruddy amber, staring listlessly back at them through time. She knows the man's hand on the smallest boy's shoulder and the way it digs too far into the muscle. She knows not to ask about this picture.

"Oh yeah," Clint is saying, "they run feral round here. Seem to remember it was once home. Mean birds. Guess they had to be to survive against the foxes, bobcats..." Clint turns back to Rogers, standing stiffly in a farmhouse sitting room with vibranium shield firmly attached to his back, "Yeah Cap, Fury knew."

"Fury knew when to keep the circle small," she says without looking up.

"A circle of three or four?" She can feel Rogers' eyes on her.

"Natasha is my partner, Captain," Clint says, nothing lazy left in his voice, "I've always trusted her."

Perhaps the pause is only long in her mind. Perhaps Clint and Rogers stare each other down for merely fractions of a second, Banner on the edge of the group actively trying to keep himself from touching anything in the house. Perhaps Thor's grunt breaks the silence before it has a chance to even be fairly named silence. Time is no longer behaving as it should.

Thor stalks from the house.

"Thor," Steve calls, following closely on his heels.
"I saw something in that dream. I need answers..." Thor's voice carries through the open door.

"Damn SHIELD, not an executive assistant," Tony says pointing at her, "William fucking Tell here," he says of Clint, "Tell me now, Fury was an actual pirate, wasn't he?"

The hammer sings against the air, Tony's continuing rant against secrets past and present is swallowed up by the rush of wind as the god abandons them to the farmhouse.

"Nat?" he says softly. She is not sure how long he has been saying her name. Rogers is still standing in the open doorway. He fills it but doesn't seem quite ready to cross the threshold. She blinks. "I'm gonna light the boiler. Reckon we could all do with a clean up." She nods sharply.

These are The Avengers, a man who can crush entire buildings in his hands currently trying to shrink himself into nonbeing. Their leader, a super solider whose belief that together they can conquer anything is so shaken he cannot bear to be in the same room, a God who uses his powers to escape, a genius hell bent on protecting the world so much he would destroy it and an assassin pretending she is anything but what they made her.

How is it that he, the most breakable of them all, is the only one still standing?

Chapter End Notes

Wow, you guys continue to be the best. I hope 'the farm house of fixing this nonsense once and for all' lives up to your expectations. This ones a short one but the next chapter should be longer... don't worry there is a hell of a lot more to explore here. You won't miss out on Natasha and Clint time and talk of monster that has nothing at all to do with your ability to carry a child (nothing even touching on that idiocy).

I have nothing against Laura and the kids, other than they seem to be a plot device so that no one points out Clint and Natasha have more chemistry over morse code than Bruce and Natasha do half naked. If you truly believed Clint and Natasha prove men and women can be friends without it needing to be romantic, I don't think you need to include a super secret family. Plus Steve and Natasha are friends, she keeps trying to set him up. But that's just me. And that's this story.

I really hope you continue to enjoy this story. Leave your ideas, your hopes, the things you need fixed, your problems with calling Scarlet Witch 'eyeliner' or quicksilver 'tracksuit'. literally anything... always beyond happy to read your comments. x
Once the boiler is lit he realizes that there are maybe three towels in this dump, four if you count the kitschy dishcloth proudly supporting the Iowa Hawkeyes. He figures he can air dry and Tash is smart and fast enough to snatch up the lone fluffy towel before Stark stops freaking out about the fact that lemons grow on trees and not bartenders. After that realization, worrying seems pointless, they’re big enough to fend for themselves, even after that little girl's mind games.

The staircase creaks in a very particular way when someone's on it. You would think he'd have lost the feel for the house a long time back but the rolling creak followed by a lower pitch clunk triggers sense memory he supposes he'll never lose. He looks up, from the cans of vegetables and jars of pickles expecting to see Barney, shaking his head but nevertheless offering a stolen biscuit in his outstretched hand.

"Cap. Watch your head," he says when it isn't his brother and grabs the freeze dried coffee. Rogers dutifully ducks and steps off the final step. He's spoken more words in the last two hours to this team than he has since he met them. "Couple of the beams aren't exactly ship shape," Clint offers patting the beam above his head. He should have fixed them a while back, other things just seemed more important at the time. Welcome to Clinton Francis Barton: the life story.

"Root cellar."

"Yeah," he agrees, looking back over his shoulder, "Thought you were a city kid?"

"France, Germany... They had a few cellars to hide in."

"Right." He blows some dust off a group of cans. Beans are probably not going to please. He thinks about handing Tony Stark a can of beans and telling him it’s his dinner, smiles and moves down to the next shelf. "'Course."

"Zombies. Now those we didn't have."

"We still don't. Least, I don't think we do." He shrugs, Wade Wilson probably doesn't count. "Mighta changed since I was certain of my Intel," he admits distractedly. He lets Rogers, in his under shirt and sans shield, eye the shelves of cans, jars and canisters.

Pasta, he can do pasta. He can even shoot one of those damn amoral birds Stark spotted. Arrows make a clean kill and Tasha isn't squeamish about plucking and gutting things. It might even do her some good, take out all the unspoken life bent me over and screwed me hard on Satan’s курица. God, he hopes it helps. "That's gotta be weird, zombie apocalypse survival plans," he adds to Rogers when that is decided.

"From what I can tell its War of the Worlds repackaged for people who got to the moon and found nothing but dust. You don't strike me as a man preparing for zombies, Barton," Rogers says, his eyes narrowing. It doesn't escape Clint's notice that the man stands at parade rest.

"Yeah?"

"What was all this for?"
"They said you were smart..." he chuckles and rubs his knuckles against the end of his nose in reaction to the dust, "Not sure if you can trust me?"

The Captain doesn't back down, "Just trying to get the lay of the land."

"Nothing like a good clusterfuck to get you back to square one with trust," Clint sighs. "I'm not much of a joiner, this place? It gets me a little distance. I see better from a distance."

"You joined SHIELD," he says, his jaw set.

"And I got to keep some distance," Clint answers curtly. He softens a little, gesturing over Rogers shoulder, "Hey, grab the tea on the shelf behind you. Green can."

He's got to keep biting back the snarkier comments that come to mind. Banner, Rogers, Thor they all got hit with the wammy same as Natasha. He knows that look in her eyes, seen it a few times just after he brought her in, saw it once down the shaft of an arrow when the bitterness and exhaustion shifted just for an instant. He might have seen it, if he'd looked properly, the first time he told her that he loved her. It isn't just haunted, though that's there too, its terror and a kind of desperation that means he'd take Loki time again if it meant she didn't have to go through it. So maybe he needs to cut Rogers some slack on the trust issues. Maybe.

Rogers turns, behind him on the wall hangs an old target bow, still strung because it wasn't worth the few extra months he might get out of it. It belies the meaner weaponry hidden in the house in areas with better security. And the meaner weaponry belies the fact that he can probably still do more damage shooting off the shelf with the bottom of the line practice bow hanging from a hook on the basement wall.

The metal bolt together shelving he'd put up against the far wall wobbles on the uneven concrete floor as Rogers selects the green canister containing the black tea.

"Tea?"

He ducks down under a beam to grab stuff on another shelf, "Nat hates the way Americans make coffee."

"Natasha seems pretty shaken up," Rogers sounds concerned. Clint decides to give him the benefit of the doubt. Rogers doesn't seem like the kind of guy to play you. If anything he seems painfully honest about almost everything.

"Those kids, punks really, they carry a big stick." He shrugs again, "She took a hit." Someone was gonna have to teach them some manners.

"You know something about it?"

"Punk kids or Natasha?" Clint asks over the top of twelve tins of peaches. Rogers stares back unamused, his blue eyes bright even through the haze of airborne dust. "That's not my story to tell."

"I didn't think Natasha could be shaken like that."

Because she's what? A robot? What exactly did you see when you flew witchy poo airlines, Daffodils and fuckin' clouds? This conversation stopped being fun twenty minutes ago. He thinks he probably shouldn't have bothered replacing the single swinging bare bulb if his cellar was going to get used as an interrogation room.

He steps out from behind the dried goods. He feels his shoulders draw back, "We all got things we
don't want to be reminded of... Some of us have more of them than others," he says his voice sounding like he's been chewing Tarmac even to his own ears, "Dark corners in our heads."

"But you know all about it," Rogers says. Clint wants to tell him to drop it but there is something about Rogers that makes him stand at attention despite himself, follow orders when his instincts always been to play a little fast and loose with them. Something in that serum must have produced leader pheromones or some shit.

"She's my partner."

"That all?"

He raises his eyes brows. "You've read our files." If Rogers keeps pushing this he's going to start getting one word answers.

"And there are things that Fury left out of those files."

"Sounds like you've got a decision to make then, Captain Rogers. You can trust me. Trust Nat. Or..."

Rogers interrupts before Clint can offer up the alternative. "The Avengers aren't supposed to be SHIELD," he says, the furrow between his eyebrows growing deeper.

Clint isn’t sure he knows what the Avengers were meant to be. He wasn’t supposed to be an Avenger, not the first time round, not now. He followed Natasha and her need to balance the books somehow. Now his mouth is going to make sure he doesn’t get to keep following.

"Yeah?" he says in much the same way he'd say 'Sir' to Coulson or Fury. Never agree, never disagree, just let the boss man's chips fall where they may.

"A little advice," Steve Rogers says stepping forward. Clint is just tired enough, sore enough, pissed that the world needs saving again enough that he might just tell Captain America to shove it up his patriotic, Stars and Stripes lined asshole when Rogers continues, "from maybe the world's foremost authority on waiting too long... Don't..."

That's what this is? The world's most senseless shovel speech. A shovel speech delivered by a real, live super hero for a woman that doesn't need a daddy with a shot gun and shovel because she could end you and hide the body without resorting to either one.

Clint keeps his face carefully blank. Rogers steps forward again and pats him once on the shoulder. "No one would be breaking any bylaws," he says, like he isn't a kid himself. He steps back possibly acknowledging the awkwardness, possibly hoping Clint doesn't begin gushing like old faithful about the wonder that is Natasha Romanoff now he has his permission to pursue her.

"Right...." Clint says flatly. He is standing in a root cellar come tornado shelter watching Captain America blush. He picks up the jar of olives, the olive oil and the dried pasta. "Cap, you think you can grab about four cans of tomatoes?"

"Tomatoes..." he repeats, "Sure." Clint swears he looks grateful.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you again to all my readers, especially you wonderful commenters who
absolutely make my day, week, month a year. You make me excited to write this. Chapter 42... it's the answer to life, the universe and everything.
She doesn't hear him come up the stairs. She wasn't listening, to the stairs, to the wood being chopped outside, to the shower no longer in use. She wasn't listening. Her suit is only peeled to her waist. Her undershirt sticks to her like it was painted on with black ink and sweat. Her fingers twist the zipper in her hand.

"They're gonna use up all the hot water…" he says, resting with shoulder set against the door frame, "I thought you'd be first in, let the boys freeze their asses off."

The quilt on the bed is made of squares of fabric that seem to be taken from other sources. Worn out clothing, curtains, sheets, they swirl and clash with yellows and browns. She dates it to the 1970's. She remembers pulling it from the shelf above the wardrobe and wrapping it around her shoulders as she went over a data dump for the fifth time. It could have been another woman who did those things. Perhaps she does not recognize this quilt at all.

She looks up. It feels as though all her facial expressions are on a time delay. "I got distracted."

"That's not like you, Tasha."

"I had this, um, dream." She swallows hard against the rising lump in her throat. "The kind that seems normal at the time, but when you wake..."

"I know those dreams," he says, his voice is low but warm. He is now in the room, "What did you dream?"

"That I was an Avenger." She nods trying to force the words out from lips that want to snap shut and a throat that wants to close over, "That I was anything more than the assassin they made me."

He looks sad for her, his face collapsing into the familiar hallmarks of concern. Natasha finds herself unable to believe it. In her head, the same strain of Tchaikovsky plays.

He crouches beside her, brings his hands up to rest on her knees. "I don’t know where that girl sent you… but I know my partner and she is so much more," he says, sounding so earnest it should be fictional. "Hey, Natasha," he says when she turns away, "Listen to me. You are an Avenger." He pushes his bent finger under her chin, dragging her eyes back to him.

"You took my hand when I gave you a choice and you ran with it. You’ve been running with it ever since. I know you think you’ve gotta make amends for everything they made you do… Natasha, when you had a choice, a real one, you made it count."

He keeps saying that name. She stands brushing his hands from her body. She moves too slowly like she is wading through a river of blood that clots at her feet. "And the things I did before you offered me my life, those choices?"

His eyes leave her face. It is a telling instant and then his eyes, sharp and cool, are back on hers. "We’ve all got 'things' and not as many reasons for doing them as you had…" Clint stands too, he favors his left knee when he is tired. "You survived. It’s not nothing. You survived and when you were given a real choice…" a sharp shake of the head, "You’ve always been too hard on yourself."
She looks down at the floor, there is a piece of lint sliding over the wood directed by the breeze from the open window. She looks back up. She smiles, tilts her head and inches closer.

“Here I was hoping that was your job.” Her palm grazes against the stubble on his chin. Her fingers find the short hair behind his ear and twist into it. She tilts her head back and presses her lips together once.

He breathes, leaning his cheek into her hand, lets his hand stroke her bare shoulder. She leans further into him, presses her open mouth to his neck. She follows with the tip of her tongue. She lets her eyes close and then she shudders against him.

“What are you doing?” he says raggedly. She pushes her thigh between his. "Hey!” he snaps. His hand on her shoulder grips her firmly. "Stop it. Natasha.”

“I’m making a choice," she says into his skin. She forces a small moan between her lips and then with her unoccupied hand she feels for the small hairs that trail beneath the hem of his own undershirt.

“No, you’re fucking not.” His hand has left her shoulder and is forcing his shirt back down pushing her hand out from under it. "I don’t need this Widow shit," he growls and then steps back, entirely out of her grasp.

“We could leave," she insists, her lips tracing the words like they are kisses. "Let the others play superheroes." She follows him, moving forward for every step he takes back, "You didn’t want to be here, Clint.”

His pupils shrink at that name, his brow lowers, “Stop!” he does not yell. "I know you’re scared. I know it feels like running away is the best option. I know. I know. This isn't you, you're the girl with the ledger." He is pale when he should be flushed. "She took your brain and played…” he says, he is an echo.

The world shifts, gravity loses its tenuous grip and then reasserts itself stronger than before. She hears her own rushed intake of breath. She feels her rib cage expand, her shoulders lift. Her fingertips by her side tingle, nerve ending sending signals about oxygen and pressure that make little sense to her brain.

Natasha's eyes sting.

He knows, his hands are around her before she can shake herself undone. Natasha knows the temperature of his skin, the rough edges of his fingertips. Clint's undershirt is the same shade of black as her own. His shoulder is tanned with the faintest seam indicating where his suit shades his skin. The pocket on his hip is ridged, she presses her hand against it, focuses on the bumps, his hip beneath it, the hard plastics refusal to give against her palm. The reality of the minor details.

Natasha blinks trying to clear her vision.

"It's why you’ve got me, okay?” he murmurs, she feels his breath in her hair. He pulls back, smiles an attempt at reassurance. "Whenever shit gets unmade there’s always one of us that remembers how to put it back in the right place.”

He holds her for longer than she would normally allow in the presence of so many team mates. The firm pressure of his body against hers, fixes her in place. His hands relax, he seems to test that she can stand on her own.

He looks down at her, looking for the signs that had made him separate from her, searching her eyes
for some clue that she is fully Natasha. He nods once.

“I’m…” she says, her voice popping like hot oil even on the one small word.

“It was strategy. Someone else might have fell for it. Even all mind fucked you’re smarter than everyone else in the room.”

“Not you.” She attempts to smile. Her lips won't do as they are told.

“Nah…” Clint grins back at her. He sits himself, with a heavy thunk on the uncovered window box. He bends to unlace his boots and she can see the remains of a spider’s web tangled in the spikes of his hair. "Just prefer my Natasha in control and ready to kick ass.”

She joins him, half peeled cat suit, sweat stained undershirt and bare feet. He straightens up toeing off the boots with a grunt for each boot. “Cap decided to give me some advice,” he offers, leaning back against the wall.

“Advice?”

“Got told to suck it up and confess my undying love for you.”

“Боже мой,” she says because there is nothing else to say.

They may be extinct tomorrow.

“Yeah,” he say through a lopsided smile, "Promise there were no rooftops involved.”

She shakes her head. He is happy despite himself, glad that someone else knows that he loves her. Her hand snakes into his hair pulling the sticky strands of web from him. He pushes into it an almost insignificant amount, like an animal accepting praise in the form of human contact. He never flinches from her blood stained hands.

“Stark? Banner? Thor?”

“Still too caught up in their own heads to notice.” He is surprised when she leans back into him, she can feel his breathing change, his abdomen clench, his heart rate quicken ever so slightly.

“We’re a mess.”

Outside the window, one floor below, unaware of all that has gone on above, Stark and Rogers demolish Clint's woodpile.

Clint wraps his arm around her shoulder and presses his lips to her forehead in companionable silence. Though the warmth of his skin against hers permeates the moment she is content to rest against him breathing easier than before.

“Yeah,” he sighs softly, his head turned to look out the second floor window, "I guess you’re all my mess now.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey dear readers... more chapters for you. Let me know what you think... please :)
The dead are dead

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The chicken's skin is scolded, the feathers come away easily but her hands are soft and the pulling at the feathers is rubbing her fingers raw. Clint had shoved two birds into her hands with a grin and an insistence that she clean them up for dinner. He had grinned like the dead bird present wasn't obviously his dearest hope that they would replace parallel bars and make up remover. She scatters the feathers off the edge of the porch, kicks them with her feet, mixing dirty grey feathers with actual dirt. They are skinny birds, these feral Barton chickens.

Her hair is drying in the sunshine, her curls grouped together tightly with no breeze to blow them out. She left Clint with her towel despite his instance he was going to air dry. Steve and Stark have returned to chopping wood not far from the end of Clint's rickety stairs, Steve's pile quickly out massing Stark's. She hears the hum of their conversation but cannot make out the words only the body language. They seethe at each other, whatever they are saying is not successful in communicating the boiling anger that spills over into their actions. She is not surprised when Steve rips a block of wood apart with his bare hands.

Clint lopes easily from the barn, he has been keeping his eyes on the team from his distant perch. He wipes his hands off on a rag and tosses it over a shoulder. It lands in the old bucket next to the truck partially hanging out of the barn door.

"That's a dead chicken," Doctor Banner says, hanging back near the door as if to flee.

"Don't get nauseated, Doctor," she smiles over her shoulder, it begins to feel like her smile, "if it helps, Barton says they are nasty pieces of work and took them out with a clean shot from the roof." She is certain that it isn't the dead birds that make him so pale. "They never knew what hit them." He creeps forward, she has seen children pulled from abuse more certain of their movements than he is. She shrugs and turns her face back to the sunlight. "It's a better death than most get."

"Is any death good?" he manages to sound disgusted and emotionless in one breath.

"Hey Stark, you're a mechanic..." Barton calls out, "Take a look at the old F100 for me? We might need her if we're gonna be here for too long. Can't really fly the jet into town."

Natasha stands and offers Banner the half-naked chicken in her hand. "My best friend thinks pulling the feathers from dead birds will help." She tilts her head indicating Clint behind her, who has in a short time since his shower managed to streak grease across his bare bicep, "Do you think philosophy is a better choice?"

"I don't think I can stomach more destruction."

No, I don't suppose you could, she thinks. The chicken is warm and sickly pale in her hand. "This destruction, as you call it, will be our dinner."

"So, it's really a creative act?" he says, incredulous.

She turns taking her seat again on the stairs, damp feathers filling her vision. Stark throws something snide back at Steve as he heads towards the barn. Clint and Rogers nod at one another, a version of a salute, a habit neither one seems willing to shake. She focuses on feathers.
It takes some time, Steve is pacing more often than chopping now, but Bruce takes a seat not too far from her. The first bird is defathered, needing only the hair like feathers to be burnt away and the butchering to begin. She starts on the second bird, wishing she had found some gloves somewhere in the house.

“You hate me for bringing you here, taking you out of your sanctuary,” she says quietly.

“No,” he says with no hesitation. He, at least, is not attempting to assuage her guilt. “I chose this, I thought...” he stops, looks back at the house and then out at the green vista that surrounds them. She can hear him swallow. “I told myself there were still places I could be safe. Calcutta, a cabin in the woods, a farm house in the middle of nowhere....”

“And now?” she asks, watching Clint incongruously climb into the gnarled lemon tree, throwing lumpy lemons at the ground, grouping them with unerring accuracy.

“There is no place in the world I am safe. Where is it that I am not a threat to other people?” He shudders in the warm sunlight, one of Clint’s old plaid shirts hanging loose on his shoulders.

“You aren't a threat to the Avengers.”

“Do the math, Natasha...” he demands and she is almost certain that she will look up into very green eyes, his voice the very echo of a man transforming, grunting out, ‘Your life!?’. She looks up from the chicken feathers. He shudders again, hugs himself, pulling himself back into the railings. She lets herself unclench.

“We aren't here because Ultron stole Vibranium from some black market weapons dealer,” he says, every word an attempted apology, “We are in hiding because I destroyed....” He looks away. “Tony couldn't even... All our contingency plans failed...”

“So you run?” she says flatly, feathers fall from her grip onto the stairs.

“What else can I do.” It is not a question.

“Fight.”

“Fight?” his voice cracks slightly, the kind of hysteria that had gripped Tony Stark, pulling his mouth into an unbelieving half smile, “Now you're willing to fight beside a monster?”

And there, as clearly as if he had laid a declaration, hand written and sealed, between them sits his truth. Bruce Banner, the only monster on the team, the only risk, she called him out, questioned his ability to remain in control, he has his proof. He has played her moment of fear, her begging, wedged beneath a fallen pipe, over and over. She knows him as she knows herself. He has lovingly coddled his self-loathing like it was an only child.

She sets her jaw and lays the last of the birds down on the porch. She does not blink.

“In the Red Room where I was raised, nothing was ever more important than the mission. I was the perfect unquestioning assassin. Have you ever seen a child kill?” her voice sound cool. That strain of Tchaikovsky plays again. She remembers the braids that hung from the little girls’ heads.

Banner blanches.

Natasha slides closer, her voice dips lower, “Not even my body was my own, Doctor Banner.... When we graduated, we had a ceremony...There was no diploma, no praise, no flowers,” she bites down on the metallic taste in her mouth, “just the surgery to make sure I would never be limited by
the possibility of a child.”

He looks horrified and then in an instant like he would give nothing more than to spew the outrageous platitudes people use to distance other people’s pain from themselves. She will not give him the chance.

“I was designed,” she lets the idea take hold, stresses the word before continuing, “to be the ultimate weapon. Those choices I thought I was making were as much a fiction as the ballets I learned to dance.”

She knows what she is doing is unfair. She is refusing to allow him his pain by winning the tragic back story lottery. It isn’t a balanced fight, it is cruel and manipulative and she does it anyway.

Natasha smiles, watches as he mimics her smile unconsciously, unaware that even it is a game. “And yet it is what I know, what I am and the choices I made after I left them... The trail of blood in my wake. What does that tell you?” she asks, he shakes his head but cannot take his eyes off hers, “Do you still believe you are the only monster on this team?”

“You can stop killing. You have some control.”

“Do I?” she asks, letting her voice lilt upwards as she picks up the dead bird from the porch. “I traded the Red Room for the KGB, for contract killing, for SHIELD...” she punctuates each of the points from her ledger with a fist full of feathers, “I thought I was going straight... I thought I’d made a real choice. A killer and spy for Hydra. For me, it seems all roads have led to death.”

“And you still believe you should fight?” he says. His curly hair and frightened eyes making him look more like a child than a full grown man. He is trying to make sense of her, trying to coalesce his friend Natasha with the child assassin, the murderess and secret keeper of the KGB, with the sharp edges and bared teeth of the fire haired woman he sees across from him on the stairs. She could help him. She could tell him it cannot be done. She could tell him no one thing is true and no one thing is a lie.

Natalia does not help.

“The dead are dead. I can no more make them live than I can bring this animal back to life.” She stands, in her hand she grips the lifeless claws of the chickens that Barton killed and she tore apart. She looks away, lets the widow fall from her face. She breathes out.

Her voice is softer when she speaks again, “What else is there but the act of amends. The dead are dead.”

Behind her Bruce continues to hold himself together with fingertips clawing at an old shirt, “Not to me. Never to me.”

Chapter End Notes

I hope you like this chapter. It took a little bit of work but I hope this is the Bruce and Natasha scene you would have preferred. Please let me know what you think and thank you again for reading.
Half the lemons are destroyed shells with their juice filling a thick glass jug when she enters the kitchen. He is working his way through the other half, chopping the lumpy yellow things in two with a cleaver she would rather be using to behead the chickens. He looks up only when she is close giving her a half smile of recognition and handing her a sharp knife from the drawer at his waist.

“Don't nick anything,” he admonishes, flipping the knife with ease so she can take the handle.

She raises a disdainful eyebrow, “Are you telling me how to use a knife?”

“I'm telling you not to stink up my kitchen.”

“Yes,” she says laying the dead birds on the counter top, “we wouldn't want the peeling wall paper and water damage to be 'fowled' up.”

“Ha!” he says too loudly, stopping in the middle of his dissection to shake his head and chuckle.

“You dork.”

Clint gives her another head shake and a twinkly eyed grin before nudging her with his shoulder, “Glad you're back, Tasha.”

‘Dork’ she mouths back at him.

Banner is in the kitchen now, following her despite her revelations. He does not know where else to go. Perhaps it is only right, she followed Clint, Banner follows her and one day perhaps the good doctor will pass on his lessons, bloody and wrathful but earned, to another monster pulling themselves out of the darkness.

Clint turns side on, the cleaver stopping mid swing, “Doc, I ...”

Behind her Banner splutters, “Needs sugar.”

He'll need a fresh shirt. She wonders if Clint even has anymore clothes here to offer these new strays.

“Yeah, sorry about that. You wanna get the sugar from downstairs?”

“I think I will.”

“Ignore the gimp,” Clint says pointing the way to the cellar with the cleaver.

“The gimp?” Banner asks swallowing again.

“Ignore the idiot,” she answers, turning away from her work on the birds. Banner’s eyebrows lift, she can see him try to erase everything he was told from the woman in the kitchen and fail. Beside her Clint grunts his annoyance that his joke has been stepped on. She smiles sweetly as Banner backs away to the sounds of Clint’s enjoyment at his own jokes.

They both return to their work, Clint decimating the remaining lemons for the scant juice inside. She slides her knife between organs and flesh, pulling without puncturing, until what remains can be
tugged out of the hollow bird.

The house is awash with noise, the creak of the farm house cellar stairs as Banner makes his way down slowly searching out the light, the empty sound of axe in the air and then the heavy split of logs, the squelch of lemons and chicken entrails and Clint’s even regular breaths counting out the seconds. It would be easy to believe they were safe, normal, not in the eye of a hurricane yet again.

“An old friend dropped by.”

“An old friend?” she says quietly, her hands continuing to work.


“And you facilitated. Is the truck really down?”

He shrugs, and begins tossing lemon husks into an old crate he’s decided is his trash can. “When the boss says jump, you gotta say how high.”

She smirks at this denial of his insubordinate ways, "You think two chickens will be enough?"

"Thor decided to bow out of the team meeting so if we fill Cap up with pasta..."

"Don't go to any trouble on my account." Behind them both, darkening the doorway, Nick Fury removes his hat.

Clint doesn't look. He squats, searching through cabinets.

"Haven't you heard?" she says wryly, "Trouble is what we do best."

"Romanoff."

"Nick. You're not a vegetarian are you?" She throws entrails in a sloppy arc towards Clint's makeshift trash can.

"You're cooking?" Fury answers.

As a reply she slams her knife tip into the cheap chipboard counter, "My skill set is more in the area of butchery..." She smiles too brightly. In response Stark, entering behind Fury, appears to shiver.

"Relax," Clint interrupts. He has acquired a large pot. He flips it and sits it on the stove top. "I pulled enough KP in my time to boil water." He looks at the knife in the counter and back to her, "No one gets poisoned."

"Unless they piss me off."

"Unless they piss Nat off," Clint agrees.

"Well, I'll be sticking with my jet snacks," Stark says in an uncharacteristic showing of self awareness

"Sugar," Banner pronounces on entering the sitting room. He looks up from the package into the eye and patch of Nicholas Fury. "Ah, Director Fury, I, uh..."

"Doctor Banner. Rumors of my death and so on."

"Yes," Bruce says assessing the assembled, "Um. Glad, I'm glad... Alive..."
Fury ignores the stammering doctor and gestures to the window, "Did you want Rogers to turn your logs into wood pulp?" he asks of Clint.

"I'll bring him in," she offers, wiping her hands off on Clint's only dish cloth, Iowa Hawkeyes, it proclaims loudly.

"The barn's a mess," Clint says lightly, "Tell him he can get started on that."

"This isn't a safe house," she says, brushing past Fury and Stark, "you just wanted people to do your chores."

Clint chuckles again. "Stark, you know how to make lemonade?"

"Quantum mechanics, nuclear physics, metallurgy, yes. Somehow I missed housewife 101."

"Bout time you learned then."

The sun light hits her face, it hangs lower in the sky now, silhouetting Steve and the axe. She closes her eyes, pushes her feet into the wood beneath them and breathes in.

Dinner is completed with little fuss and not enough annoyance for anyone to be poisoned. Nick is picking over the remains of one of the chickens as he speaks, "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."

She scratches her arm and ignores the beer next to her as Clint collects plates dumping them on the counter by the sink almost as though he intends to clean.

Leaning against the wall in Clint's largest sweat shirt, Steve asks, "What about Ultron himself?"

"Ah. He's easy to track, he's everywhere. Guy's multiplying faster than a Catholic rabbit. Still doesn't help us get an angle on any of his plans though."

Tony's darts make a clear thunk into Clint's stolen dart board. She has watched him fidget and twitch through the meal, eating faster than he should just to have something to do with his hands. She has noted the way his hands bunch into fists when anyone other than Banner speaks.

"He still going after launch codes?" he asks, pulling darts out of the board.

"Yes, he is, but he's not making any headway."

"I cracked the Pentagon's firewall in high school on a dare." This for once is not a boast, merely a statement of fact and an implicit question.

"Yeah, well," Fury responds, "I contacted our friends at the NEXUS about that."

From his wall, arms crossed, Steve asks, "NEXUS?"

It is Banner, still hiding in the shadows behind her, who answers, "It's the world internet hub in Oslo, every byte of data flows through there, fastest access on earth."

"So what'd they say?" Clint says watching as Tony takes his anxiety out on the undeserving dart board. In his left hand he smooths the fletchings of a set of three darts.

"He's fixated on the missiles, but the codes are constantly being changed."
"By whom?" Stark asks just as three darts hit the center of the board mere centimeters from his face. She hides her smile, looking down at the remainder of Barton made sauce on her plate. Clint throws up his hands and grins.

"Parties unknown," Fury answers smoothly.

"Do we have an ally?" she asks.

"Ultron’s got an enemy, that's not the same thing," he says ever the spy, shaking his hand for emphasis. "Still, I'd pay folding money to know who it is."

"I might need to visit Oslo, find our "unknown."" Stark muses.

"Well, this is good times, boss," Natasha says, her voice sounding husky with tiredness, "but I was kind of hoping when I saw you, you’d have more than that."

"I do, I have you," Fury answers her, his gaze taking them all in, the archer wedged in the corner impossibly, humanly breakable, the philanthrobot with clear signs of post traumatic stress, the scientist hiding his strength and his rage in the shadows of a farm house, the super soldier with no one worthy enough to follow him and the spy drenched in so much blood she could drown them all.

"Back in the day, I had eyes everywhere, ears everywhere else. You kids had all the tech you could dream of, so here we all are, back on earth, with nothing but our wit, and our will to save the world. Ultron says the Avengers are the only thing between him and his mission, and whether or not he admits it, that mission is global destruction. All this laid in a grave."

She looks back to Clint, allowing herself this one moment, she cannot read the look on his face. The one moment she allows herself and he stares back a stranger.

"So stand," Fury orders, "Outwit the platinum bastard."

She pouts back at Nick, "Steve doesn't like that kind of talk."

"You know what, Romanoff?" Steve says pushing away from the wall. She smiles mischievously.

"So what does he want?" Nick asks them. Use your wit, your will, the one thing Ultron doesn't have, use your humanity.

Clint pulls out a chair, twists it round and rests his arms on its back. He watches them silently, his shoulders hunched, his forehead furrowed.

"To become better," Steve answers with natural intuition, not the kind that can be taught or programmed, "Better than us. He keeps building bodies."

"Person bodies. The human form is inefficient, biologically speaking, we're outmoded," Stark continues, his hands fiddling with the darts as he gestures, "But he keeps coming back to it."

Bruce comes closer, staring at the wheat patterned platter in the center of the table. They seem energized by the rousing speech but Natasha finds herself smiling wanly, unable to see how this will stop Ultron or his lab rat protégés. "When you two programmed him to protect the human race, you amazingly failed."

"They don't need to be protected," Banner says. He reaches out running his finger along the pattern, "they need to evolve. Ultron's going to evolve." He looks up, seemingly surprised by his own conclusion. His gaze flickers first to Tony then to Fury seated at the table.
"How?" Fury demands,

Banner blinks, calculates, his eyebrows raise, "Has anyone been in contact with Helen Cho?"

Chapter End Notes

I have realized going back over this that I have left off doing my DVD extras... does anyone miss them? Let me know if you do or don't. If you do I'll go back over the last 20 or so chapters and put them in, it's a little bit of extra fun for me. Please enjoy the calm in the middle of the storm, you know what happens next... and thank you once again for reading.
“You up for this?” Clint asks over his shoulder, already at work with the pre-flight checks. She pulls up the zip on her suit. It does not feel as though it fits right.

“Are you?” she asks instead, “When did you last sleep?”

“I’m good,” he smiles at her reflection in the screen of the Quinjet, “I didn't take any of the girl's LSD.”

“The girl.”

“Yeah, she's what?” his voice is preoccupied and guileless, “Like twelve?”

“They're adults, dangerous adults helping our enemy plan the end of the world.”

Clint stops his checks, his hand resting on the panel above his head, “You sure they know that?”

“What they know or do not know means jack to me.” She reloads her glock. “These are not strays. If it’s you or them. It's them.”

He leans back in the seat, his face is the stranger’s face she saw in the kitchen. “Tash, it’s not gonna come to that.”

“You heard Nick.”

He nods once, looks back to his console and quirks a smile, “Never seen a movie where the rag tag bunch of underdogs don’t come out on top.”

“Barton, we ready?” The Captain’s steps are heavy on the metal floor. He cuts off any intention she may have had for correcting Clint’s suicidally optimistic take on their mission.

“We waiting on anyone?”

His shield is unlocked from his back and he takes his seat. “Fury's taking Banner, Stark's on route to Oslo. We head for Doctor Cho.”

“Right.” His nod is sharp. His gaze is focused. His left hand covered by his shooting glove flicks a switch. “Strap in. Wheels up.”

She looks up from the clasp of her seat belt. Steve is watching her intently. She returns his stare, wants to force him to look away first. Suddenly, she feels as though she has had enough of these men who think they can read her thoughts by watching her face. He turns back watching the green turn into blue. Natasha raises an eyebrow.

Barton hovers the jet a far distance from the roof of Doctor Cho’s Seoul laboratory. She releases the seal on what Clint persistently calls ‘the trap door’. The rush of turbulent air from the jets beneath blows her hair about her face. Rogers swings his shield on to his back.

“You’re good to go, Cap” Clint calls out over the roar. The Captain leaps through the hole and vanishes.
Over the comms they can hear him, a puff of breath and then, “Two minutes, stay close.”

In less than the allotted time Rogers’ feed sparks up again, “Dr Cho!”

She is softer, not as close to Steve’s comm and clearly struggling to provide the information they need, “He’s uploading himself into the body.”

“So much for recon,” Clint mutters as Natasha accesses the onboard computer, notifying Seoul emergency services via the national emergency management agency. She adjusts the call log showing a disconnected emergency call from inside the building. It will be traced in a matter of moments.

“Where?” Steve asks.

“The real power is inside the cradle,” Cho gasps, “The gem, its power is uncontainable. You can’t just blow it up. You have to get the cradle to Stark.”

“First I have to find it.”

Natasha brings up the manifests of all outgoing air traffic, comparing them to the scans of the vicinity.

“Go,” the Doctor insists.

“Did you guys copy that?”

“We did,” Clint replies, his voice is tense.

“I got a private jet taking off, across town, no manifest,” she offers, narrowing in on the undeclared transport, “That could be him.”

Over comms, Clint interrupts, “There. It's the truck from the lab.” She looks up from her screen, “Right above you, Cap. On the loop by the bridge.” She swipes across the computer tablet, pulling up Clint’s screen. “It's them,” he verifies, the jet picking up the radiation signals of each of the scepter enhanced ‘bots, “I got three with the cradle, one in the cab.” Clint pauses for an instant, “I could take out the driver.”

“Negative!” Rogers responds immediately, “If that truck crashes, the gem could level the city. We need to draw out Ultron.”

She blows out her breath. The cleanest solution is Clint’s but it would only yield more debts. So they return to war.

She and Clint can hear the consecutive blasts when Rogers leaps from the overpass. “Well, he's definitely unhappy!” Rogers declares, “I'm gonna try and keep him that way.”

“You're not a match for him, Cap,” Clint insists.

“Thanks, Barton.” Rogers’ response is quieter but still audible.

“Nat! Grab a hold, we’re comin’ back around,” Clint orders just as he tilts the jet. She braces herself against the hull before the twist and the sudden kick pushes them back at speed towards the truck and the Captain.

“Find me a window,” she calls out over the roar on the comms, “I think I’m needed.”
“You know what's in that cradle?” she can hear the insane robot now. There is a blast. “The power to make real change, and that terrifies you.”

“I wouldn't call it a comfort,” Rogers responds. The blasts continue.

She hits the release, takes a moment to assess her way down to the fighting below.

“We got a window,” Clint says, “Four, three...” and then in a voice that does more to prepare her than any order she has been given, a low rumble, “Give 'em hell.”

She grips tight and the floor comes away beneath her. She hears him pull up and away behind her as she races into traffic, following the trail of Ultron’s transport and Captain Rogers.

“I’m always pickin’ up after you boys,” she says mostly to herself as she leans the cycle down to collect the shield. It attaches easily to the front of the cycle.

“They're heading under the overpass, I've got no shot,” Clint says. She can hear the irritation in his voice even if it would be unheard by anyone else.

“Which way?”

“Hard right...” he reports back. A silent count down and then “Now.” She swings hard to the right, through the small gap in traffic and up into the narrow streets.

She jumps the bike up the incline, “Right again. Now,” he orders from above. The street narrows. As she comes to the end of the alley the lab’s truck is in view. She twists leaning the bike down, sliding almost horizontally between the wheels to the sound of the cycle’s complaints.

Steve hangs precariously off the edge his hand trying to pry the metallic fist of Ultron from his neck. She releases the shield from her handles and with an effortful swing throws it into his hand. She is sighted and with a bluish tinged blast, too unlike Stark’s repulsors and too like Loki’s scepter, the pavement in her immediate future disintegrates in explosion of gravel and tar. She slams on the brakes, pulling up the back wheel to prevent herself from flying over the stalled cycle.

She follows, squeezing down to return to speed. The Ultron minions return fire. Direct pursuit is not going to work. There is a pedestrian ramp to her right.

“Out of the way!” Natasha calls out. Despite it being in English, the high powered cycle moving up the ramp seems to suggest to the pedestrians scattering might be the smart move. “Coming through! Sorry, coming through!”

She has a plan. “Clint, can you draw out the guards?”

“Let's find out,” he responds somewhere above her.

“Beep beep!”

Even weaving through traffic she can hear the telltale sound of the jet’s rounds being loosed into the transport. The jet cuts through the sky at speed, the engines whine as he forces them into a vertical climb.

“Heading back toward you,” Clint calls, “Whatever you’re gonna do. Do it now.”

The truck is just up ahead, “I’m going in,” she replies, “Cap can you keep him occupied?”

“What do you think I've been doing?” is his exhausted response.
She pulls herself up, feet on the cycle’s seats, balances for an instant before grabbing the edge of the truck and dragging herself in. The cycle falls as it hits the vehicle in front at full speed. She rolls.

The cradle is an aquarium green but inside is the beginnings of an android designed to kill the world. It is like looking into a shark’s egg. The operation panel is at one end repeating its flashing declaration of ‘Connection Lost’. She tries to initialize an override, delete whatever information Ultron and Doctor Cho have provided this shark with. Her first attempts yield only the response, ‘User Override Denied’.

Suddenly, the truck lurches upwards, she falls, tumbling over and towards the open doors. She grasps at the transport straps, stalling herself as the truck soars. She heaves pulling herself forward as they level out.

“The package is airborne. I have a clean shot.”

“Negative!” she blurts out, “I am still in the truck.”

He is responding before she has a chance to finish, “What the hell are you...?”

“Just be ready,” she says “I’m sending the package to you.”

“How do you want me to take it?” he says, giving up whatever inclination he had for telling her how stupid her plan was in an instant. She pulls her knife from her thigh.

“Uhh,” she replies, her voice climbing an octave as she equivocates, “you might wish you hadn’t asked that.”

It takes a little effort but she cuts through all of the cradles tethers. “Get the cargo bay door open. Weighs about four hundred pounds with the cradle. You can calculate the arc, Hawkeye,” she offers, her smile turning feral.

“It’s not the math I’m worried about.”

“It’ll be fun,” she responds with a nod, looking towards the jet, “Just like the trapeze.”

“You’re right, I wish I hadn’t asked.” His voice is slightly staticy but absent of any signs of distrust. “No somersaults!” he orders and she grins back.

“I lost him. He’s headed your way!” Rogers yells.

“Nat, we gotta go,” Clint responds, she plants her timer and cuts her remaining secures, leaping forward as the cradle slides from the truck bed towards the open Quinjet cargo hold.

The wind rushes past her face, her fingers cramp against the sides of the plummeting cradle. The truck explodes into flames behind her, the heat and the force of the blast hitting her back. She could swear it feels like hands grab her legs as the world goes gray.

Chapter End Notes

Hello readers. I hope you enjoy this chapter. Not much to change in this one at all but I
have brought back the DVD extras (anything underlined is a link) and will be adding them to past chapters over the next couple of days. Let me know what you think.
One, one thousand.

"Nat!" he yells. No response. Extra static down his line. The blast has pushed the Quinjet forward. He dodges the blast radius the best he can. He stabilizes his course on instinct. His muscles are doing the work on their own now. His mind is counting down.

Two, one thousand.

"Cap, you see Nat?"

Three, one thousand.

Wake up, Clint, wake up. Wake the fuck up!

Four, one thousand.

"If you have the package get it to Stark," Rogers replies, "Go!"

"Do you have eyes on Nat?" he repeats. There is no way he's being ordered to leave if Natasha isn't safe. They wouldn't...

Five, one thousand.

"Go!" The Captain orders through the squeal of metal on metal.

Six, one thousand.

He pulls back, lifting the Quinjet further above Seoul.

"Dammit!" dammit dammit dammit dammit dammit dammit dammit dammit.

It's got to be a dream. You got knocked out. She's fine. She's alive. She's yelling at you to wake up. This didn't happen before. This is the first time. This is the first time and it's wrong.

He pulls the comm unit from his ear and screams.

Not even JARVIS is here to hear him now.

The scream tears at his throat.

His hands are on the wheel, fingers clawing into the rubbery coating. The world shrinks. It's as if he can hear a thumping coming from the package. The last thing Tasha did, she got them the package. He's going to get it to Stark and then he's going to burn it. Burn it to the fuckin' ground.

You're doing it again, Hawkeye, he can almost hear her saying, that intense killer face. Your breathing changed it woke me up. Which rooftop were you on this time? The job's not finished, Barton. Finish the job and then you can have a sandwich.

You know it used to be just me in here. Okay, that's a lie, sometimes there was Trickshot, Barney...
my dad, mean voices the lot of them. I have no idea when I woke up with Natasha Romanoff in my head judging everything I do, telling me when I'm stupid or wrong. You'd think a spy and an assassin would be the most nasty voice I got up in here, but Tasha... God, Tasha don't be dead.

Don't be dead, Natasha.

"Barton, do you read?" Banner is saying, a soft buzz from the ear piece quickly shifting to the jet’s speakers, "We've lost connection with Rogers." He is probably repeating something his said several times down Clint's discarded comms.

'Doc," he answers flatly, "I read you. I'm coming in hot with the package." His console shows no signal from Natasha or The Captain's comm. "I don't have Rogers." He toggles between frequencies trying in vain to get a connection from either one. "His comm is down at my end too."

"Can Natasha..." the Doctor begins futilely.

"It's just me and the package, Doctor Banner," he cuts him off before the Doctor can take him to an imaginary present where Natasha's in the back hacking into things and making dryly sarcastic comments about the men they've, she'd, tied herself to. Instead Clint bites down on his next words and makes it absolutely clear where they stand "Rogers was alive when I was ordered back."

"What?" Stark cuts in, "Was he with Romanoff?"

Stop asking, he wants to scream. Stop asking because then I'm going to think about why Captain America didn't just say I've got eyes on your fucking partner, Natasha Romanoff is alive, I caught her as she fell, Natasha... I'm going to ask myself how possible it is to survive that explosion, that distance to the hard ground of Seoul. I'm gonna calculate time, distance, wind shear, velocity, the seconds between her voice and static.

"We lost contact," he says and it doesn't sound like he is bleeding, it doesn't sound like a mortal wound sucking the air from his lungs. It should. It should. God help them, it should sound dark and cold. It should sound like hell is opening up beneath his feet. "She sent me the package. Rogers told me to get the package to you."

"Did Rogers..." Stark says.

"No one had eyes on Romanoff." Nothing in his voice betrays how much he forces those words from his lips. The sweat at his temples is cold. "Instructions are to neutralize the package."

"Barton, are you?"

"Coming in hot, Stark."

"Right."

He slams the jet onto the pad and is launching himself from the pilot seat before the cargo bay is fully open. His hands scramble against the tension in the straps over his chest.

"Package." Banner is climbing the ramp. Clint doesn't look up, he marches onwards. "As ordered."

You'd think Thor would be the one throwing around the thunderous looks, ястреб. The Natasha in his head smirks. Head Natasha is always smirking.

Stark steps into his path. "Here." He proffers a lever of some kind.
"What's this?" he says trying to walk through Stark rather than allowing the man to stop him to chat about the engineer's latest metal wonder.

Stark gives a little sigh and pushes the lever into Clint's chest instead of shifting out of his way, "Figure we might as well kill two birds with the proverbial single solid aggregate of minerals."

"Huh?"

He wants to get up high. He wants space, distance, empty sky between him and a long drop. He doesn't want to pretend to be a hero. He doesn't want to make nice with flashy playboys and their pet physicist. He wants everyone else gone. If his best friend isn't here, the rest of them, the rest of the world, the rest of the motherfucking universe can hurtle down the longest drop there is.

"Have at it, Hawkeye," Stark answers, a shade too kindly. He blinks then, like even he has caught himself, like even the billionaire knows when kindness, pity, understanding will be thrown back in your face like the worst kind of insult.

His hands are still pressing the metal bar into Clint's tac vest. Stark rocks back on his heels, his hands drop as Clint takes the bar. Clint looks up from the lever and follows Stark's sight line to Banner and the now hovering cradle. "We've got to get in," Stark says more matter of factly, "Heard nothing about Romanoff, by the way. I gotta believe that's a good sign. In the meantime...." Stark brushes past Clint, he seems to want to pat Clint on the shoulder his hand hovering in the air by his deltoid and then looking into Clint's face he flings his hand in a sweeping arc over the cradle Doctor Banner controls with a Stark pad. "Rage. Meet box!"

"Right," Clint growls.

After minutes of tracing seams, bouncing metal off reinforced glass/plastic substitutes and swearing under his breath, he climbs on top of the ominous green coffin staring down into the abyss of it, wishing there was a right amount of pressure, a secret button, something, anything to unlock it like a can of spam. He could tear Ultron's dream shell apart with his own hands if he could just get in.

Stark and Banner are muttering in a corner of the lab.

"This is sealed up tight." He springs himself off the casing, his voice sounds only tired now.

"We're going to need to access the program, break it down from within," the Doctor replies.

They don't need him. They never needed him. Natasha would be the asset here. Natasha was always an asset.

Wake up, Clint, he thinks his hands resting on his hips. The lab looks too real. Stark and Banner are saying things he could never dream up. But it's gotta be a dream, a messed up, fucked up, mind screw, Loki dream.

"Hm," Stark says, "Any chance Natasha might leave you a message, outside the Internet, old school spy stuff?"

Like that, the fool who put them here hands him the sliver of hope he'd be searching for.

"There's some nets I can cast." Sharp, single nod. "Yeah, alright," he follows the stairs down to Natasha's computer lab. "I'll find her," he says with the certainty of someone who will not allow the alternative to exist.

'Tasha. Don't be dead.
Chapter End Notes

Sorry this chapter has taken so long guys. I started a new job and am doing extra training on top of my client load so I've been a bit distracted from Clint and Natasha. They are not forgotten and I will do my best to get to the end of Ultron before Civil war comes out. Thank you for still reading. You are the best
Not dead.

There is a throbbing beat in her temple and a sharp nerve pain in her lower back. Dead, she assumes, features less pain and more quiet. Hell, she knows, features more ballet and blood.

She opens her eyes slowly not certain they will open at all until the last of the sweat and blood mixture cracks separating her eyelashes. She is on a stone floor; she can feel the cool leeching heat from her body even through the protective layers of her catsuit. Her surroundings swirl, she forces her eyes to focus, pulling at distant images, disregarding the pressure in her skull telling her to close them again.

"I was unsure you'd wake up," the electronic hum of baritone begins before the shapes define themselves. Natasha pulls herself upright. "I hoped you would." It sounds genuine despite the contradicting circumstances, the robot's capabilities, her position on the floor, haphazard and disregarded. Ultron sounds convincingly lonely, longing, in pain. If she was of a philosophical bent she might consider the ramifications of building an intelligence and driving it insane, but she is and always has been focused on the now, and the problems that can be solved.

There are metal bars at her back.

“I wanted to show you. I don’t have anyone else.” The twins have left him then, his acolytes jumping ship to wherever she cares not. Stop the first target, then find the next. She frowns, her lip pulls tight, dried blood cracking as the torn pieces try to separate again.

“I think a lot about meteors,” the machine says gesticulating operatically, “the purity of them. They always talk too much, just once she'd like to meet her opposition and have them be Potemkin in their silence. It would be new at least, if less helpful to her modus operandi.

“Boom!” he roars. “The end, start again. The world made clean for the new man to rebuild. I was meant to be new. I was meant to be beautiful. The world would've looked to the sky and seen hope, seen mercy.”

Natasha slides herself back slightly towards the opening in the bars.

“Instead they'll look up in horror because of you. You've wounded me.”

Ah yes, madness and narcissism and the grand slide into look what you’ve made me do. I didn’t want to hurt you but you made me do it. Why do you make me angry, you know what will happen? The externalizing of the responsibility for their emotions… she stops, brings her thoughts up sharply. It is a mechanical man, a sophisticated piece of robotics but robotics none the less, why would the programming lead to the thought processes of abusive parents and misogynists across time and culture.

She had told Clint that the robot’s behavior smacked of hubris and until now she wasn’t entirely sure she had said it without one ounce of the need to shut down his barely concealed fears.

She opens her eyes widely, let’s her features mimic terror.
“I give you full marks for that. But, like the man said, "What doesn't kill me…” In a ball of sparks and violence, the center of the machine crumbles in the fist of a newer, expanded Ultron, “…just makes me stronger,” the monster gloats as she makes her move, pushing herself back towards the open cell.

The heavy hand seals her in.

She pants, sounding, even to her ears, shocked and full of adrenalin.

The monster strides away ignoring her as one would a gnat.

The monsters never remember that the lock protects her too, it is a delay, a breakwater between her and them, it makes it oh so easy for them to forget that she is a threat. Put the spider in the dark corner, leave her to her own devices.

The cell is full of old electronics.

In the shadows she pushes her hands through her hair checking for blood or deformations. The thud at her temple continues. Her hands come away clean. She swallows. Natasha pulls herself up at the table made all too conveniently by a discarded crate located in her cell. She is stiff but she places a wire between her teeth and strips it of the rubber coating.

It takes her, by her count, two hours and twelve minutes to pull the scraps together and begin transmitting. There are no clocks, no natural light but her internal chronometer rarely fails her. The time she was unconscious goes unaccounted for.

Find me, Barton, she allows her lips to frame before the first number of her emergency code is tapped onto the makeshift telegraph.

The repetition is soothing, she finds herself beginning the short message again without her normal focus. The mechanical spin and clunk of Ultron’s operations continue with no acknowledgement of her actions or her presence. The device pushes back against her finger tip.

Code.

Simple code.

His number.

Then letters replaced in a format that she has told him to stop using, one she tells him will develop into a calling card rather than anything covert, one she knows he uses because he thinks it’s an amusing comment on his partner.

Nihilist cipher.

I’ve got you.

Chapter End Notes

A short chapter after such a long delay. The shortness was necessitated by the pacing of the original materials but I apologise none the less. I hope to write more frequently now but I'm working long hours and chronically overwhelmed by URTI's (the bane of
working in paediatrics). Will try to complete this and the Starbucks fic ASAP though. I hope you are all well and know that I haven't stopped thinking about my readers and my commenters :)


He grins.

Static drum beat of code barely making the distance.

His number, not hers, tapping its way across mountains, oceans, up and over microwaves.

He checks again, not trusting himself not to imagine he’s found her. He pushes the old headphones to his ear. The constant tick, tick, tap is still there.

He types back an echo, his number fed back and an attachment he formats quickly in his head. Every letter replaced by numbers and added to the key she will guess in less than a second. When decoded it will read ‘IVEGOTYOU’.

He abandons the ancient radio equipment Natasha refuses to admit she hordes. Useful is not the same as useless, she’d say, these picture books are useless, and she’d toss his comics off his bed like they had scabies. One day, he’s gonna prove her wrong. He gets that ‘one day’ again. The smile doesn’t truly leave his face; it just makes its way to his eyes as he uses Natasha’s programs to narrow in on the signals origins.

He doesn’t blink when the mapping coordinates he finds trigger her systems hijacking of a satellite in the vicinity. He imagines the whirling clicking sound of high powered telescopic lenses in the distant darkness as the screens brings up the pixelated overhead shot of a familiar castle.

Of course.

You wouldn’t want to go being original or anything.

The science nerds have been bouncing off each other for several hours. There is silence for large, empty, clicky periods and then one of them will rattle off a stream of technical details the other grunting or firing back what might as well be the same words a little rearranged then silence again, hummy, clicky blue hologrammed silence. He has, without knowing it, been listening for the sound of a freezer opening, elevator doors parting, the air seal on a contagious disease ward cracking open anything to indicate they have made it into Count Dracula’s travelling case there.

Banner and Stark have been buzzing at each other for the last five minutes, a longer duration. Below them, part of him listens closer wondering if it indicates the final break through, maybe they’ll let him put an arrow in the things eye socket for closure or whatever.

He clicks on the program called Lisa. It’s very name is a convoluted bilingual joke that she has with herself and one that she thinks he’s too dumb to get. He opens it, biting his bottom lip, while Natasha’s favorite program scans Strucker’s castle lab for heat signals. It would be nice going in to know if there was any flesh and blood beside Natasha’s to avoid covering the snow with. He knows too deep down and he won’t be able to get verifiable signatures but it might give him a place to land.

The heavy thud above him is recognizable as Cap’s boots but they land in a strange place. Clint looks up.

“I’m gonna say this once,” comes the order and Clint is drawing the side arm he dislikes but isn’t
fool enough not to have on him.

“How about ‘nonce’?” Stark is replying as Clint sinks back into his firing stance focusing in on the feet on the glass floor above him. Cap’s got company and he’d bet those running shoe bedecked feet belong to tracksuit twin which puts the black and red inappropriate footwear down for eyeliner.

“Shut it down!” Rogers commands.

So the mad science brothers have been fucking with Tasha’s present, he reasons quickly, instead of, you know, fucking with it. He shifts his sight to Stark refusing to unplug, delete or whatever it is he should be doing to crush the shark egg in the tank.

“Nope, not gonna happen.”

“You don't know what you're doing.”

He can’t get a read on Rogers from this angle but here unseen, all but forgotten, he has the advantage over whomever it turns out is screwy.

It’s Banner who answers from where he stands his hands almost raised up as if he was trying to surrender. “And you do?” he gestures suddenly at the twin behind Rogers, “She’s not in your head?”

“I know you’re angry,” Eyeliner begins, a guileless uncertainty smoothing out the sharpness that was in her voice before. Banner cuts her off before Clint can really calculate what this means.

“Oh, we're way past that,” he says, “I could choke the life out of you and never change a shade.”

“Banner, after everything that's happened...” Cap says.

“That's nothing compared to what's coming!” Stark replies for Banner. If Banner’s feet are honest he is well beyond considering Cap’s words his focus is entirely on the slight Sokovian girl trying not to hide behind her brother.

“You don't know what's in there!” she says. Through the floor she sounds desperate.

“This isn't a game...” Cap says, their voices colliding with each other.

“The creature...!” she shrieks. The boy takes off. His feet, black foot prints on the thick ice and then gone.

He tracks the air parting around him, the papers flying off sleek surfaces, Banner’s shirt tail suddenly airborne. It’s like calculating where to put the arrow, only here and now the kid is the arrow.

The kid skids to a stop, his feet reappearing close to where Clint’s figured, he’s getting better at this. He drops the cabling he’s apparently yanked with a complete disregard for getting himself killed. Kids. No sense. Kids. Always goin’ around thinkin’ they’re immortal.

“No, no. Go on. You were saying?” the fast one sneers.

His bullet is faster though.

It leaves the chamber and Clint jumps back out of the way of the falling glass and the speed freak.

“Pietro!” the girl cries.
Clint steps back up onto the platform and puts a heavy boot on the kid’s thigh. “What?” he asks as
tracksuit peers at him from between two protective arms, “You didn’t see that coming?”

“I’m rerouting the upload,” Tony is saying above, the hiss of the computer drive’s cooling system
bursting back into the field of noise.

Clint looks up through the hole never taking his weight off the twin’s leg, stopping him from righting
himself.

Rogers throws his shield. Bouncing it off the console near Stark’s head and suddenly Ironman armor
is flying overhead. Banner grabs the girl, hissing at her. The repulsor fire that comes with Stark
reverberates across the room and Banner recoils from the girl like he’s been hit with a paintball gun.

Clint gives up holding tracksuit and throws himself up the stairs, he’s ready to fire as soon as he
works out who he’s supposed to fire on.

So much for a team. So much for a mess. Roger’s is thrown back with a blast. These guys can’t
even go one day without friendly fire and Clint, well, Clint Barton is damn sure he needs Natasha
Romanoff to tell him if it’s time to cut and run, she's the only one he’s ever felt that friendly towards
anyway.

Before he has a chance to take little red mindwarp out of play Thor decides it’s time to make his
grand fucking entrance. He’s on the cradle, hammer raised, before Clint’s even registered his
arrival.

Banner yells.

Lightening rains down from the ceiling.

The world takes a breath.

The shark’s egg hatches.

A man shaped, flayed looking thing is crouched over itself, livid and raw.

If he is honest, all he thinks looking at this bare, new, animal is that Natasha would kill him for
dropping his weapon to his side.

Then it leaps forward.

And Thor leaps forward flinging the thing towards the skyline.

It stops short, like acceleration, momentum, gravity, are all suggestions it can disregard. It’s that, the
disregard for physics that starts Clint's skin to crawling. The red, smooth new man hovers, staring
out at the thousand lights of the city or at his own new face Clint doesn't know or care to know.

It flips and floats back to where Thor stands holding them all back with a wave of his mighty hand.
“i'm sorry, that was...” the thing sounds like JARVIS, “odd.” It turns to Thor, “Thank you.”

It changes shade, it grows clothing of a sort, it even generates a cape as it stares at Thor.

Clint is done.

Clint is so done he ignores speedy skidding his way back to his sister.

"Thor,” The Captain asks, "you helped create this?"
"I've had a vision. A whirlpool that sucks in all hope of life and at its center is that." Thor points to the ugly yellow stone at the center of the crown shape on the JARVIS voiced man.

Clint swallows a sudden urge to put a bullet right through it. He know the urge is only half explained by Thor's answer.

"What, the gem?"

Thor answers, his voice lending the answer the tone more of a saga than a sitrep, "It is 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 bring it to..." Rogers is asking.

"Because Stark is right."

"Oh, it's definitely the end times," Banner is saying wryly even as his body language says I have reached the cap on my body’s ability to make cortisol.

"The Avengers cannot defeat Ultron," Thor intones.

"Not alone," the JARVIS thing says.

"Why does your "vision" sound like JARVIS?" Rogers asks.

"We...we," Stark hesitates, Stark never hesitates, "reconfigured JARVIS' matrix to create something new."

"I think I've had my fill of new," Rogers says sounding every bit his 90 plus years. 

"You think I'm a child of Ultron?"

"You're not?"

"I'm not Ultron. I'm not JARVIS. I am...I am..."

Oh good, the things a Descartes scholar with borderline personality disorder, it'll fit right in. He's supposed to be stealing the jet. He's not supposed to be watching these morons fuck around with stuff they don't understand and then blame each other when, I dunno, the world starts to end. Again.

"I looked in your head and saw annihilation," the girl says. The accents wrong but the terror and the determination is a little too familiar.

"Look again."

Clint chuckles darkly as he approaches, “Yeah,” he growls, “Her seal of approval means jack to me.”

"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. But with it on our side..." Thor says and Clint wants to finish the thought with things that Loki would whisper and hiss about opening his mind, ruling the realms... He shakes his head clear again.

"Is it? Are you?" Rogers demands, "On our side?"
"I don't think it's that simple." Its voice is soporific in the face of the apocalypse.

Clint is twelve categories of done. He is supposed to be in the jet. He is supposed to be grabbing his partner and fucking over the world. "Well it better get real simple real soon."

Its insane eyes take him in for the first time, "I am on the side of life. Ultron isn't, he will end it all."

"What's he waiting for?" Stark says. If Clint could find a bone in his body to care about Stark now, he might register that he says it almost as if he is craving it.

"You."

Banner rouses himself to ask, "Where?"

"Sokovia," Clint answers for the creation, "He's got Nat there too." If any of you care, he feels like adding.

"If we're wrong about you," Banner says sensibly over the nice head of steam Clint can feel himself build up, "if you're the monster that Ultron made you to be...

"What will you do?" It looks over them all like it can read minds, for all he knows it can. The girl can, can't she? In the voice of a meditation tape it says, "I don't want to kill Ultron. He's unique, and he's in pain."

And Clint wants to tell this newborn guru what pain really is, he wants to scream out the nights of killing the woman he loves, the cold that burned through his body like chemo and the way bones that were never set properly ache even when it's been twenty odd years since your brother broke them for you.

He wants twenty eight little girls lying on steel gurneys, not crying for their mothers because the only mother they have ever known is mother fucking Russia, on a flash drive and downloaded into this thing's brain.

He wants to yell about losses and agonies that he shouldn't know about, about dead parents who were too much to live up to, or fathers who named you a monster before the world ever did, about waking up and finding out everyone you ever knew, loved, cared about, lived lives without you and then left before you ever got to tell them you'd be back. Things he knows, things he will always let them pretend no one knows.

Clint does what he always does when the outrage, the injustice is too large, to incongruous, to measure. He waits. He lets the world narrow down to the place the arrow goes and he waits.

"But that pain will roll over the earth, so he must be destroyed."

Sometimes it is worth waiting.

"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. Maybe I am a monster," the thing asks. Stark's hands clench. "I don't think I'd know if I were one. I'm not what you are, and not what you intended. So there may be no way to make you trust me. But we need to go."

Stark's metal man, Thor's vision is holding the hammer. Clint sucks in a breath letting his jaw unclench. No one moves save for the vision, it's cape floating on nothing.

“Right,” Thor says abruptly ending the silence with words that couldn’t be less portentous, “Well
done,” he pats Stark’s shoulder.

The Captain quickly follows the God, “Three minutes. Get what you need.”

In his armory, he grabs his jacket, attaches cartridges to his boots and bundles together a quiver full of arrows, making sure each of his specially designed heads are in place. It isn’t until he sits adjusting the line of the jacket that he finds it. In the thigh pocket of his suits pants, below the hard plastic ridges of body armor designed to protect the major blood vessels, there is a small hard piece of metal.

He pulls the metal free. On a thin chain, delicate and deceptively strong, a shiny little arrow swings in the still air.

Chapter End Notes

Hello dearest readers,

How about a competition? if you can work out what little linguistic joke Natasha is using to label the heat sensing software on her computer then you get to offer up a two word phrase, no matter how ridiculous, for me to use in the next chapter. :)

Thank you for still being here to read this story.

We should be coming to the end of this journey soon. Which I know will make you WIP adverse peoples happy.

You all make my life better, I hope you know that.
We fight robots

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

She put her lock picking skills into action the moment the Ultron drones started crawling out of the hole it had dumped her in. By her calculations they are late.

The earthquake puts a stop to her movements momentarily but she picks up her tools again when the shaking doesn't end. She hunkers down, two feet and a hand planted firmly on the moving rock and she thrusts the screw driver, digging again and again against the side. She just needs a divot large enough to stick the electronics and the chewing gum into and she can fry the lock.

Clint had thought the gum hidden in her suit was for the aftermath of honey trap work for the first six months of their partnership. She had thought it was further proof he underestimated her. Years later she realized it had more to do with the distaste he had for the idea of kissing people you couldn't possible tolerate than a belief that her skills set was only in beautiful death.

The screw driver glances irritatingly off the surface of the metal adding needless seconds to the process but she smirks remembering Clint Barton telling her to hand over her gum after he'd been the one to distract a particular heaving pile of villainy.

The divot has grown enough and the rattle of earth has died down to a questionable hum. Whatever is happening to the old fortified castle and to Sokovia is not born of nature. She spits the gum into her hand. The movement, the upwards force she feels is born of Ultron and sired by Avengers.

She squeezes saliva from the rubber's surface and pushes her rigged circuits into the indentation. She moves as far as the reclaimed wires will allow and forces her widow's bite into overload.

It is a sizzle not a bang, she prefers things that don't make noise. The acrid smoke makes a dull grey pathway to her nostrils. A sharp kick rocks the fried mechanism loose and she can heave the heavy gate away from the bars. She moves it only far enough to squeeze through. The grating wheeze of the metal against stone is echoing in the chamber and Ultron has amassed enough leigonistic clones to have left a guard.

She makes her checks and then inhaling smoothly, she runs, climbing as parts of the dungeons begin to crumble. Natasha follows the path of the Ultrons.

She leaps forward across gaps forming in the earth, gravel and dirt tearing through her nails and hands. She drags in more air in a gasp, the last of the stone is holding together and the opening leads to the outskirt of the city.

She needs weaponry. She is down to one bite and her own bruised expertise. She heads towards the city following the sounds of destruction and fear. Her body is pushing adrenaline through her arteries, her mouth is dry and the world is brighter, sharper, brushing at her skin in the altered way that means she is, at the heart of things, afraid. Natasha does not swallow, there is no saliva left to swallow down. Natasha does not stop.

She doesn’t turn when she hears him double time marching up the rise beside her. She recognizes the footfalls. There is nothing mechanical about the strut Clint Barton uses to convey himself. She finds herself, even floating in the increased blood pressure, hyperglycemia and muscle tension, adding a slight sway to her hips, even now not willing to allow anyone to know.
“Aw man,” he grumbles upon seeing her, the mutter is barely audible over the sounds of fighting ahead. “Just once, I’d like to do the heroic thing and rescue you,” he says louder, the sarcasm not quite covering the joy in his voice. She wants to turn around. She wants to kiss him, hard and feral. There is always another Natasha though and with clinical dispassion she repeats inaudibly, ‘the job isn’t done yet’.

“You’re disappointed in my failure to incur a debt?” she answers, a hint of glottal fry betraying the physiological effects she does her best to mask

He is closer now, “What, so you’re the only one who gets to balance the books?” he says gruffly. “Glad you’re not dead, Romanoff.”

There is a moment then, she could turn and look at him, she could get close enough to inhale the scent of him, she could stop her ceaseless march towards the ruin their good intentions and Stark’s desperation has brought. Maybe if she turned she’d be able to turn back to the war, maybe she is strong enough to do right even when he offers her an escape route. She might look at him and not see the exhaustion and the relief he is covering. She might see him and not feel herself slip into the widow. It is possible, all things are possible.

“Death is a luxury for people who have finished the job, Barton.”


“You already walk too slowly.”

“I’m conserving energy, Ol’ Ultron decided it wants three sixty views and we don’t all have your lung capacity.”

“Meteorites,” she says and picks up her speed. A fraction of a second later Barton hauls himself forward after her.

The Captain is throwing orders down the feed she no longer has access to when she clears the rubble. Behind him is the lab rat girl with a brittle, skittish look about her that reads weakness. The girl is wearing a very familiar red leather jacket.

“Rogers,”

“Romanoff.”

Rogers responds with a curt nod that doesn’t finish before she is asking harshly, “Is that my jacket?”

The girl looks away, swallowing down on what Natasha is sure is a mixture of dry tongue and dust.

“She’s with us,” Rogers answers as if that explains how the girl who sent her back to the birthplace of her nightmares is now a trusted member of team ‘We were just trying to help’

“That still doesn’t explain the jacket,” Natasha knows it sounds just light enough to be ignored by Rogers and but still pointed to keep the girl uneasy enough that she’ll make the kinds of mistakes Natasha might need her to make.

“Fighting these robots is getting us nowhere.”

Clint is by her side and in an instant he is handing her batons, an ear piece and enough ammunition to defend herself, “The airs getting thin,” he says, not acknowledging the fragile linked metal that is
dropped into her opened hand with her comm, “We go up any higher people are gonna start dropping.”

“There are people in the city,” the girl’s voice is not as sharp as it was and the accent isn’t as reminiscent of Russian as Natasha once thought it was, “still hiding.” The girl won’t look at Natasha.

“Root ‘em out,” Rogers orders, the girl flees like she is glad to head back into the fray if it means she doesn’t have to look Natasha Romanoff in the eyes. The girl saw things. “Barton?” Rogers quickly adds.

Clint gives a small shrug, “I got her six.” He is already turning to follow; he has adopted yet another stray. She sees him then, a glimpse before he leaves, his eyes are still blue and his eyes are still heartbreakingly kind. “What?” he mouths defiantly as he leaves.

She slips the necklace into the pocket on her right hip.

“And us?” she asks, activating her batons.

“We fight robots.”

The gust of wind and dust coalesces into the other Strucker enhanced, the angry radical in the tracksuit who had thrown Clint into the path of a plasma blast. In his hand, is what is left of an Ultron drone.

“Today??” he asks with the same facetiousness of an exhausted Clint Barton, “We fight robots today?? Or is next month better for you?”

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again for the delay. I have every intention of finishing this story but unfortunately have no Stark level of obsessive, achieving sleeplessness. I just get regular depression sleeplessness that makes for really shitty writing. It's a short scene based on a deleted scene and I hope you all enjoyed that Natasha Romanoff is no damn damsel in distress.
She looks at him. It's a flash, nothing more, green eyes under darker eyelashes than a redhead has a right to. He breathes easier even against the thinning air. It's Natasha he sees starring back in the flash, not the widow, not a layer of people between him and her and, if it's only for a flash, he is glad of it. They go down in flames, they fall from the heavens like maybe they were always meant to, then we'll he's glad he got to see her one last time. He's glad they'll fall from grace, luck, together, really them.

He should say, he loves her. He should say, don't you give me that damn arrow ever again, it stays with you. He should say, we are both too old, too damaged, too cynical to believe in charms and talismans but you better hold on to that arrow. He should say a thousand things.

Her eyes though, her slight smirk, slight shake of her head communicates more in a flash that he ever could in all the time they have left. Still collecting strays, ястреб?

"What?!" he says like a child, his body already following the actual child back through the debris.

'What?!' is going to be the last thing he ever says to her. It's as good a last words as he should expect, he supposes, better than 'shit, this hurts' or 'I was aiming for the trash' or asking her to dance. Better than Cap's brief fatalistic pep talk ringing in his ear, he thinks, as he drops to his knee to get a better shot.

Then Ultron speaks, the same smooth disdain amplified over a flying city. It speaks of meteorites and things they have brought upon themselves, it speaks of a world made metal.

No. These aren't going to be his last words. The last ones that matter anyway. He couldn't give two shits what he says to Stark, Banner, even Rogers but if 'What?!' is the best he can do for her, he's gonna just have to suck it up again and save the damn world.

The girl did not pick the best color for camouflage, she is a streak of scarlet against the greys and browns of Sokovia's back alleys. She pauses the creepy gleam of light curling out from her ever twisting hands towards the rooms and doorways of people to dumb and frightened to pick themselves up and run.

There is a shimmer in the distance. Silver, movement and then more silver, he draws and releases too many times to measure but the hoard advances.

Even with the t'chi of the bow string in his ear he can hear her panicking, her breathing quick, shallow and uneven. Scarlet coat, dress to flimsy too offer any resistance and a hand on the back of the old woman's head begging her to duck, thinking it would save her.

He takes out one, two Ultrons, the heavy duty arrow heads embedding themselves in their power source and dragging them out of the sky to hell but it isn't enough. They advance, wasps and locusts. He dodges, only just in time, a blast that would have sent him to the very same hell.

She's stronger than them all, maybe save Banner, but when it comes down to the metal terror tumbling down on her, she throws her hands up in a way that would earn her defensive wounds in any other battle and the robots are flung haphazardly into the brick and stone of a nearby wall. She is power with no aim, worse still she is power with the control of a cornered animal.
He takes a run at the abandoned car, leaps and twists like his fourteen-year-old body could do over whatever the swordsman thought would bring in the biggest crowd. ‘You better jump high, baby brother, they don't care if you end up an inch thick’, Barney would say oozing with exhaustion and jealousy. He lands on the other side of the drone and fires into its head before he has a chance to feel his older bones and joints scream.

The sky is filling with them. It's ancient Egypt plague time and the girl is the Nile turned blood red.

He glances at the sky, couldn't tell you what it was he sees before he is running at her. "Go, go, go!" he orders, throwing them both forward towards a window. The blast does the rest.

She's muttering, curled in on herself, long dark hair walling her in her own personal prison. He catches bits and pieces. "All our fault...". Yeah, kid you done fucked up.

"Hey, hey," he says reaching out for her, "Look at me? It's your fault? It's everyone's fault. Who cares?!"

His knee is bitching again. She looks up at him. Her eyes swallow her face, she is wild and terrified and she might well go catatonic on him any minute.

"Are you up for this? Are you? Look, I just need to know cause the city is flying," his voice is cracking on the insanity of it. Come on kid look at me. This moment, stay in this moment, you done fucked up, well, we all fucked up. You met Stark. Fuck ups the lot of us. "Okay. The city is flying; we are fighting an army of robots. And I have a bow and arrow. None of this makes sense."

Shot punctures the wall. He is annoyed more than anything now. These things are just pissing him the fuck off. He draws and aims through the hole. He doesn't need to see if he hit his mark he just moves forward towards the huddled girl.

"But I am going back out there because it's my job." Jobs not done. "And I can't do my job and babysit." There are tears in her eyes, streaking through the grime on her face but her mouth hardens into a familiar line. Elfin features encircled by dark hair, he shouldn't feel like he's talking to an echo, a repeat of history.

"It doesn't matter what you did or what you were." It's the single tear that forges a pathway down her cheek that is the most wrong, wrong enough that he can shake himself clear.

"If you go out there you fight and you fight to kill. You stay in here you're good." He raises his eyebrows, she's stopped rocking. "I'll send your brother to come get you but you step out that door, you are an avenger."

"Al'right," he mutters, heaving himself up from his crouch. "Good chat."

He takes the quiver box from his boot, doesn't really look back at the kid, the shards of light from the shrapnel holes miss her crouched form anyway. Twenty arrows nocked and ready. "The city is flying." he repeats. He sucks in the thin air. Jump high, baby brother, his internal monologue whispers and he kicks back through the door.

His first barrage gives him the limited space he needs to find cover but it's like an old space invaders arcade game out here. Each 'bot he takes out generates a new line of falling distorted shapes trying to kill him at faster and faster speeds. Even if he gets the high score, alone, it's still game over.

He twists taking out the major road blocks to the almost comfortable looking pile of crap behind a burned out shitbox car. His final arrow is nice and explodey giving him time to make a break for it. Perhaps time for a younger, slept for a full six hours, Clint to make a break for it. This Clint makes it
on a knee that's not keeping up. "Ow" he says pointedly. Stoic is for people not flying through the sky on an eastern bloc side street.

A bow is not a melee weapon, he's meant for standing behind the guys on foot throwing fuck yous at the shiny French, not waiting as metallic death advances on him all singing gears and LED eyes.

If he was of a soulmate kind of bent he might try saying goodbye to her now, like she might feel it. He might think hard on the red of her hair, the green of her eyes and the never ending river of strength in her core. He might go out thinking that she was his best call. He might make sure his last thought was Natasha in his arms asleep, or Natasha grinning at him, or Natasha, just Natasha.

His last thought is gonna be, "Robots fuckin' suck, Man."

Then a shiny metal man rips in half and crashes into the wall. He looks up, the girl is bathed in a permanent red glow emanating from her hands and she is definitely not catatonic. He draws and takes out two in quick succession before she obliterates every last one of them.

In the pause, he gives her a sharp nod. She doesn't speak.

He presses the small button on the base of his right palm, "Right. We are all clear here."

"We are not clear here. We are very not clear here," is Rogers' forced reply.

"Al'right. Comin' to you," he barely gets out before Speedy McGee is distorting the air and forcing Clint backwards.

The tracksuit kid picks up his sister like she weighs nothing, to be fair she looks like she weighs nothing, how much could eyeliner and hair weigh. "Keep up old man," the boy says even as the twins blur out of existence.

Clint draws, anchors himself with the feeling of the string against his anchor point. "Nobody would know," he grumbles aiming at the distant pattern of displaced dirt, rubble, debris. "Nobody." He throws the arrow back into his quiver. He picks up his feet letting his bow drop. "Last time I saw him an Ultron was sitting on him. Yeah, he'll be missed. That quick little bastard, I miss him already."

Chapter End Notes

I wanted to do this scene justice because it is the closest this movie really came to getting Clint Barton right... I wonder if that had a lot more to do with Jeremy Renner's portrayal than Joss's understanding of Clint. I am definitely not sure I managed even half of what was in my head.

Anyway, I'm sucking major arse at getting these to you on any sort of schedule and a would promise to do better but my client load is a shifting sand of horror at the moment. I want you to know I appreciate all of you for sticking by me. When we finally finish getting this fixed I will go back and finish the babyfic and bathe you all in the warm soapy bubbles of Clint Barton cooing over a small red headed toddler and scaring the pants off anyone who come near her.

Let me know what I could have done better in the comments.

Love you all.
A view like this

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

There isn't time to so much as rub the dirt from her face in the gap between direct assaults before Steve is calling down the comm, "the next wave's gonna hit any minute. What have you got, Stark?"

"Well, nothing great," Stark muses. He is always quieter than the rest of them, something about the sound distancing quality of his helmet causing him not to force his voice over the comms. "Maybe a way to blow up the city. That'll keep it from impacting the surface if you guys can get clear."

"I asked for a solution, not an escape plan," Rogers says instantly.

"Impact radius is getting bigger every second," Stark replies, "We're going to have to make a choice."

The words that want to come from her mouth are about planes and icebergs, about the martyrs never called martyrs because they weren't alone in death. The first words that she swallows back down are unnecessarily cruel. At the very end, cruelty is unneeded. A man with a bow taught her that.

"Cap, these people are going nowhere. If Stark finds a way to blow this rock... " she says instead.

"Not 'til everyone's safe."

"Everyone up here versus everyone down there?" she repeats incredulously, "There's no math there."

Maybe if she gave herself more time she'd catch his way of speaking, some adopted foreign thing, latching itself on to her voice. Perhaps she'd notice and feel the need to confirm he would say it too, he would do the calculations, take one last look and swing for his last window. If the world wasn't ending, she'd hear her choice of words and make sure. But if the world wasn't ending then there would be no equation.

He squares his shoulders and doesn't look back. "I'm not leaving this rock with one civilian on it."

"I didn't say we should leave." The books will never balance, but she will not add this to her debts.

Steven Rogers is still praying. She can see that. He believes in miracles. He doesn't realize that all their choices are bad here. Even if they save the world, this path? They've already gone too far down it for everything to remain known, safe, good. Here and now, it all changes. And Ultron is right, all change is destruction.

Steve turns to look at her. He is second guessing what he heard, he is wasting time looking for some proof she didn't just declare her plans to dive into the ice alongside him. She stops him before he has a chance to say anything about what she might have to live for. "There's worse ways to go," she says lightly, "Where else am I gonna get a view like this?"

A view to die for.

She can't save him; can't pay back the debt he's never let her repay.

The only thing she'll let herself think about the man who gave her back her life is, at least he's up
high with a clear line of sight. She clenches her jaw and stares out at the tundra of clouds. She is done with those thoughts.

A static pop in her ear and then the voice answers her. "Glad you like the view, Romanoff. It's about to get better." It is a voice that answers Steven Rogers prayers.

The carrier hauls the clouds apart like a Russian icebreaker, “Nice, right? I pulled her out of mothballs with a couple of old friends,” Fury is saying, "She's dusty, but she'll do."

She will never convince them of the existence of no win scenarios now.

"Fury, you son of a bitch," Steve answers, his relief tangible.

"Oooh! You kiss your mother with that mouth?"

Natasha allows a smirk to form. They've been granted the space for such things.

"Altitude is eighteen thousand and climbing," Hill's voice reports over the comms.

She watches, breathing in thin air as slowly as she can, as lifeboats launch from the bay doors of the outclassed hellicarrier.

The Maximoff boy appears without his usual gust of wind. He climbs over the fringe of debris scoring the edges of the ever rising island.

"This is SHIELD?" he asks without looking back. She grants him the moment; salvation is difficult to turn away from.

"This is what SHIELD's supposed to be," the Captain answers.

"This is not so bad."

"Let's load 'em up," Rogers orders.

She turns towards the cafe housing survivors, feels the heat of distant fire at her back. Whipping her head back she sees the drones descend on the hovering transport. The streaks of silver are joined by a new less streamlined form taking them out of the sky. When she sees. The silver joined by a red and gold companion she recognizes Rhodes.

Natasha runs back to the shelter steering people towards the waiting lifeboats and throwing cover where she can. Along the curving edge of Sokovia she knows Clint is doing the same. She is glad of the firefight in the distance now, it covers the screams and terrified Sokovian voices crying out in the smoke. Woman, children, old men, young men, frozen like herd animals expecting her to carry them to safety. She would even take Clint's off key singing, the single incongruous distraction to keep her tethered to the job.

"We're out of time." Thor's voice is in her ear piece instead, "They're coming for the core."

"Rhodey, get the rest of the people on board that carrier," Stark's responds as the last of the refugees pass her.

"On it!" Rhodes crackles in her ear. She looks out at the nearest transportation.

"Avengers," Stark says, "time to work for a living."
There is a truck. Convex plow at the front. It'll do.

“Romanoff?” Stark’s voice crackles in her ear, “You think a little kidnap gets you out of the final big boss battle?”

She shifts gear, “Relax, Shell-head.” Clint hates the way she drives stick, says it’s like she learned to drive from movies. "Not all of us can fly."

Natasha hangs from the arm rail on the stalled plow for an instant, ahead sits the heavily damaged church in the epicenter of the flying city. The mechanical sounds, the screams, the clash of weaponry have all stopped. There are no animal sounds other than her own quick breaths. She drops the foot and a half to the ground.

"What's the drill?" She frowns as she enters the sanctum.

"This is the drill," Stark answers, gesturing to a metal and stone structure, "If Ultron gets a hand on the core, we lose."

She nods sharply and positions herself in front of the rock.

Clint is next to the Maximoff girl. The slight thing protected on both sides by her brother, who occasionally blurs in sudden movement, and the archer.

The space to her right is cool and empty.

In the distance, an Ultron appears.

“Is that the best you can do?” Thor roars.

In answer, a new wave rolls towards them.

“You had to ask,” Cap offers lowly.

“This is the best I can do,” the monster declare, spreading his arms messianically. “This is exactly what I wanted. All of you, against all of me. How could you possibly hope to stop me?”

She rolls her shoulders back and reloads. Hope? She doesn’t do hope.

“Well, like the old man said.” Stark says beneath his helmet, as though he didn’t sound like he had aged a thousand years in the last two days, “Together.”

Chapter End Notes

New chapter... I am getting closer to having Clint and Natasha back together again and getting to write the bits i really want to write, stuff that has me googling various slavic languages words for simple. Anyway I'm still sorry its taking me so long but I promise Id much rather be writing this than CELF reports
They don’t tire and it is not unlike fighting an army on a mountain top. She cannot do more than grasp at each monstrosity that approaches and twist and fry until a memory of a burn on her wrist is all she can feel and the sound of her own gasps is all she can hear.

The wave draws back and she only thinks it is may well be the tide that proceeds a tsunami and not a victory.

Through the remaining arch Thor declares, “They'll try to leave the city.”

“We can’t let ’em,” Stark responds, “not even one. Rhody!”

Natasha sags ignoring the Sokovian twins. “I'm on it,” Rhodes is more static and crackles in her ear.

Clint is at her side. He places his hand under her elbow before she is aware of how much she has given up to gravity. When she is upright again he withdraws and a few steps away she can still feel the sudden lack of heat from his touch.

The more they ascend the colder it becomes. Her suit is not built for thin, cold air. It is still doing more work than the girl’s flimsy dress and her stolen jacket. Clint is bare armed and appears unconscious of the drop in temperature.

“We gotta move out,” Rogers orders. “Even I can tell the air is getting thin. You guys get to the boats, I'll sweep for stragglers, be right behind you.”

“What about the core?” Clint says sharply.

“I'll protect it,” the girl answers and looks at Clint, “It's my job.”

It sounds like she wishes to be hurling insults at him and has, through will power alone, swapped each curse for a single non offensive English word. Natasha cannot help but smirk. For his part Clint returns the girl’s statement with a single nod, ignoring any subtext that may have been inflicted with it.

“Nat,” he says and waits the fraction of a second it takes for her to pick up her feet.

“This one,” he says of the purple German car, easily ignoring her abandoned truck. She smiles wanly. He draws a knife from his boot and is pulling and cutting through wires before she has taken the passenger seat.

She has no doubt that he has already plotted a path through the debris. There is a sizzling sound as the engine starts and he mutters, “Fuck” and comes up sucking on his fingertips.

“I’ve been thinking,” he says pulling the wheel left, “I could take some shit out of boxes. Somebody owes me time in lieu right? Get caught up on some TV maybe even buy a dog.”

“A dog?”

“Yeah, a smart one, one inside out ear, raise it from a puppy,” he says like they aren’t on a flying
city, breathing in rapidly thinning air. “Teach it to do tricks.”

“No.”

“No?!” he says not taking his eyes off the road.

“Get an older dog. Get a rescue.”

“A stray.”

“You’re good with strays…” she says, “and they love you.”

They hurl thinly vailed abuse at you with unerring regularity but they can’t help but love you, you fool.

He pulls the hand brake to stop them hard within running distance of the lifeboats. In the gap they can hear the roar and grunts of the Hulk.

He turns to her, knows what she is planning to do before she has thought to do it. “We don’t have a lot of time.”

Her heart is racing, her body trying in vain to compensate for the lack of oxygen in the thin air she is breathing in. The thump, thump, thump echoing in her ears is making it harder to count down the minutes they have left. It is making it harder not to panic.

Natasha reaches across the short distance to the driver’s seat and tugs Clint forward by his collar. He is distracted but comes willingly, leaning across the gap until she can press her broken and dry lips to his.

It is difficult to kiss beautifully as the world is ending. Whatever passion may supply is quickly drowned out by the adrenalin parched tongue and the frantic movements made graceless in the flight or fight. His cheek is warm in her hand, what scent she can still make out is entirely him and she fights herself to let go of him regardless.

“So get your ass on a boat,” she says.

He grins at the order.

She did not want to let go of him and she know she does not want to approach the beast now. She has done every sensible, advisable, reconcilable thing to remove herself from contact with Banner’s other guy. Tony Stark may think the placid scientist and the ogre from a nightmarish fairytale share more than they do not but she has seen the worst of him and has steadfastly refused to be placed in that situation again.

Tony Stark is not able to perform the lullaby now.

Who knows if Banner would survive the detonation of this meteoric city. It is perhaps a little more than a bullet.

She removes her glove.

Strength comes from intelligence and intelligence is found in the details, miss one detail and you may have missed every detail.

They told her about the lullaby.
She made it her business to learn every detail.

“Hey, big guy,” she says. She refuses to let her voice tremble.

The beast turns, animalistic grunts taking the place of its roars. It appears, despite the every scream of her senses to the contrary, to recognize her.

“Sun’s getting real low.”

She puts up her bare hand, wills herself not to pull back when it comes closer. Pressure points. Trigger words. These are things she is familiar with. Brutal but effective methods to change behaviour, to change minds and yet Stark and Banner have built into this routine other things she would never have thought would be useful… kindness, trust, a kind of patience.

He grunts again, frowns at her like a child disappointed that its mother has come to read the bedtime story and not the dearly wanted father. His hand goes up, comes closer expecting the pressure of her touch, yielding his control to allow Banner to return.

Then there is gunfire.

Chapter End Notes

We are almost at the end now. Finally. Short Chapter this time and the next one will be from Clint's point of view and we all remember what happens from Clint's point of view... I just might try to fix that.
Clint Barton has a stitch, he has an entire knitting pattern down his left side. At this point, it would be more accurate to say that a stitch has Clint Barton. He breathes in again, a long drag of thin air and lets his bad knee crunch as his boot hits the hard metal of the lifeboat floor.

Former SHIELD agents are ordering people around. The sound is flat, it isn’t carrying well. Their words are English. The people are terrified and hyperventilating. It’s the kind of context that makes second language processing impossible. You’d think they’d know that. You’d think they’d attempt some Sokovian, familiar Russian something less… The wall that faces the edge of the former city still has most of a red eyed, be capped, Captain America staring out at the boats. “Secure your gear,” someone is saying. Clint reads the roman lettering sprayed across the image ‘Fascist’.

He’d sigh but that requires more air that he currently has in his lungs.

“Costel!”

It takes him a moment. The words sound like he is listening through a hotel glass and badly laid drywall.

“We were in the market…” the woman says, she’s blonde and her forehead is split open and oozing. He doesn’t think she’s even aware that no one around her is listening. Her chest heaves again, desperation overriding the body’s need to conserve energy.

There should be more thinking involved, more actual choice in the matter. He is scanning the rubble for anything that looks market like before she has even said the name again.

Of course, it’s a child. Small enough to miss, too large to have been held on to. From this distance, he isn’t anything more than a dark head bobbing up and down like he is drowning in the concrete sea that used to be a stairwell.

The engines on the lifeboat whirls hard against the ever-increasing pressure to stay afloat. He drops his head and sucks in another breath. It’s not far, not really, not if you could breathe, not if you hadn’t just been fighting for your life.

But it’s a kid.

Fighting for his life.

And a desperate woman calling out for him.

So, Dr Cho will need to make him a new knee… or two.

The kid’s left leg is stuck under rebar, he keeps trying to pull himself up on the remaining railings and failing. He doesn’t look up until Clint yells down at him, “Come on,” his voice hollow and cursing himself for not having picked up any useful Sokovian. He doesn’t say, ‘this is gonna hurt, kid,’ doesn’t bother to add, ‘but not as bad as exploding’. He just yanks.

The kid doesn’t scream, he merely whimpers. He’d be real happy to never have to hear any kid whimper ever again. He doesn’t hear it, can’t really hear much that isn’t right near his ears anymore but there is a definite popping sensation as the kid comes loose. He hefts him up against his chest, the kid’s eyes roll backwards and a seam of white gazes up at him.
He has a matching slash of raw forehead but his chest is rising and falling with desperate breathes as Clint turns back to the boats.

The bullets look like water popping in the oil on a cast iron skillet.

They make their path towards him with unerring accuracy.

He swings round and hopes to shield the boy.

It feels like a gust of wind.

The world is silent.

It doesn’t feel like a year, a second, hours… it feels like twelve minutes. It feels like twelve minutes exactly to make sense of the silence, the sensations, the child heavy in his arms. Twelve minutes exactly to know that he is still alive and to look up.

Pietro Maximoff sways on his feet. There are jagged holes in his arms and his chest.

“You didn’t see that coming,” he says in a single catching exhale. He hits the ground. His eyes don’t close.

Twelve fucking minutes, when every minute counts. It took him twelve fucking minutes to look up at the angry, show off, tracksuit wearing fuckin’…. Fuckin’ hero. He puts the kid down. Somewhere in this, he puts the kid down. Somewhere in this he is pushing numb finger tips into thin skin on necks and pushing almost deaf ears onto chests.

He pushes down hard on the sternum trying to adhere to a rhythm despite time’s unwillingness to stay tethered to reality. Pietro Maximoff’s eyes aren’t closed and they are an all too familiar grey blue. Clint turns his head and pushes down hard again.

He doesn’t know how long Rogers has been saying his name but he has the boy in his arms and anything he says but his name sounds like static. Clint pushes down hard again. There is a wound beside his overlapped hands and it leaks with every heaving shove against the chest.

It is cold and silent.

Rogers is kneeling beside them, pulling Clint’s arms away and pushing his own fingers into the grey neck. His mouth is moving. Clint only hears the same static ringing he has heard since Pietro Maximoff said his last words. Rogers is nodding, mouthing words and grabbing at the arms still oozing blood into the ragged edges of a running shirt.

Clint reaches forward again, his hands already crisscrossing to continue the compressions.

Rogers clamps his hands around his face forcing him to look up from the grey and blue target that masks a sternum and rib cage. “Barton!” he yells not an inch from his face, “Move now.”

Captain America hauls the prone body of Pietro Maximoff over his shoulder and makes for the nearest lifeboat.

Clint Barton’s hands are smeared with brown looking blood, when he blinks he sees grey blue eyes that do not close.

Clint Barton stands up and forces himself back to the lifeboats.
All he can see are running shoes, their soles are worn down, melted down and at the edges rubber hangs dog ended and dirty. He can’t follow the legs that extend from the shoes, by the time he gets to knees the body is swamped by medics.

The sobbing woman doesn’t stand, she cries out and Clint thinks that it’s strange that she doesn’t stand. The boy in his arms is still unconscious. He staggers over his last step before the muffled call for a medic escapes him.

“Costel, Costel!”

Someone who isn’t Clint is telling her the boy is fine, alive. They tell her in Sokovian; he can hear the Slavic sounding ziv-ishing. The words are familiar and unfamiliar. He looks away. The swamp of medics are thumping evenly. The defibrillator charge is building, the zinging sound is hollow.

The child is out of his arms now.

“Thank you, thank you, thank…” It is heavily accented English.

His hands are covered in the spider webs of somebody else’s blood.

“Clear!”

He staggers forward again to the body on the metal slats, the press of danger colored people blocking him from view. He tries to hold himself up right. His hand come away from own his side with new redness. It has seeped through the binding on his suit.

Somebody in a yellow vest is fussing around him, he shoves them back.

“Nah, it’s okay, I’m okay,” he mutters breathlessly.

It buzzes at him again like bees, like wasps. He swats at it.

“Him. Not me. Help him,” he says. It doesn’t listen. He can’t think of the Russian, the only Sokovian word that finds its way to his tongue is the word for ‘puppy’. He shoves again.

It isn’t until the arms are under his and dragging him backwards that he realizes Rogers has been behind him all along. He is off his feet for an instant and barely stops himself from trying one of Natasha’s moves.

“Barton!”

“Back off,” Clint yells, twisting out of the Captain’s grip.

“Not going to happen.” Rogers shield is attached to his back like a portable halo. “Let them do their jobs.”

“‘Kid’s not walking it off, Rogers.”

“He still could.” They are inches from each other, calling each other out over the roar of engines fighting with atmosphere and the flattened wails of frightened people.

Clint’s mouth twists into an ugly smirk, ‘‘Cause someone said he could be a hero! He’s a fuckin’
kid."

“He made a choice.” Rogers body checks him again pushing him back from the medics.

“Yeah?” Clint asks, he blinks and sees the eyes again, grey blue. “Where’d they get the idea they could make that kind of choice?”

“They?”

In the middle of a flying city is a girl with too much eyeliner and too much pain and she’s doing a job she shouldn’t have to do. She’s a little thing, stronger than she looks and she… someone’s gonna have to tell her that…

She had one thing that made the world bearable.

He had blue grey eyes and he spent his life making the world bearable for her.

“We…” he sneers. “I fuckin’ told her to go be a hero.”

Sokovia lurches.

The lifeboat screams.

Rogers, the boat, the kid in the running shoes melt away behind the white heat.

Other than Rogers the only person in his team he knows to be safe is himself and right now, just now, he would be fine with counting himself out of that one. He falls back onto the metal seat hard, the lifeboat shudders and pulls out and up, riding on shock waves and other people’s nerve.

Captain America is trying to raise Stark, Thor, anyone, tapping at his earpiece as a dust cloud rains down around him.

The new ash covered world goes grey. It starts at the edges and for a minute or two he thinks it’s only Sokovia raining down on his line of sight but as the boat clanks and creaks its way through docking color leeches out until the man before him is 1940’s b roll

“Clint!” Captain America says and then maybe he curses.

And Clint is fine with counting himself out.
“Natasha!” Steve Rogers shouts. Natasha scrubs at her face before quickly dropping her hands to her lap. She looks up at the man weaving between consoles and debris. He is covered in a fine layer of dust. “Are you?”

She shakes her head firmly, stopping his question. It is a question that would be nothing but an attempt to raise whatever injuries she has to the same import as the loss faced by the refugees now flooding the Helicarrier. “I lost him,” she says simply.

Natasha stands; she favors her right knee.

“Him? Who? Are you injured?”

“It didn't work.” Her lip stings when she attempts to moisten it. “The... Banner, he...” She looks away. “The lullaby didn't work.” She should never have been the one to perform it. She was a spy and an assassin sent in the guise of a diplomat to retrieve Banner. It was fait accompli. The beast would never trust her, he knew her. He knew her too well.

Rogers clenches his jaw. “He was in the city when it...”

“No.” She shakes her head again. “One of the drones attacked us. It...” She widens her stance. “Banner got me here and then went after Ultron.”

“He's alive then.”

She closes her eyes. “He wouldn't let Bruce out, wouldn't turn the jet around,” she says of the overly large yet childlike face that grunted its way through her plea before jettisoning any hope she had that the beast would listen. “He's in the wind.”

“If he's alive, we'll find him.” Steve Rogers is doggedly optimistic.

“The jet's in stealth mode. We can't track him.” Her grip tightens around her wrist. “He doesn't want to be found.”

“I've heard that one before. Hasn't stopped me yet.” Steve attempts a smile, it fails barely making it above exhaustion. “Doubt it will stop Tony.”

“Stark?”


“Thor?”

“Recon with Rhodes and the Vision, looking for any loose ends.”

“Maximoffs?”

“They're on the hospital level. Pietro, he threw himself in front of... they're working on him. It doesn't look good. The Vision got Wanda off the rock before... she's down there...” He gestures with a complete disregard for the layout of the carrier. He blows out a breath, looking at the palms of his hands like they were completely foreign to him. “Looks like she's been hollowed out.”

“How?”
“What?” Rogers is distracted. It is distraction borne of the drop in adrenalin. His brow furrows.

“How was the Maximoff boy injured?”

“Shit!”

There isn’t the space for a wry aside, his cursing has collapsed space into a single point, “Steve?”

She hadn’t said his name, knows now she was refusing to say his name.

“I was going to tell you first.”

“Clint,” she repeats without intention.

“Clint went for a kid who didn't make it to the boats. They took fire.”

She runs.

“Natasha!” he yells after her.

He grabs her arm, dropping it as he quickly comprehends the mistake he has made. She glares down at his offending hand but maintains her speed. “He's going to be fine,” Rogers says jogging to keep pace. “Pietro blocked them. He's in shock, blood loss and lack of o2. They're treating him. He's stable.”

“The boy?”

“Altitude sickness and a nasty cut.” Steve Rogers is a good man but he doesn’t understand why she asks that now. He doesn’t know Clint Barton. “He's fine.”

She stops short, whipping round in time to catch Rogers deftly skidding the final inches, “Pietro Maximoff?”

“He's in surgery. Clint got his heart going... they lost it again on the boat...” he shrugs helplessly. She knows he isn’t lying. “I don't know.”

“He threw himself in front of a bullet?”

“More than one.”

“Where is Barton now?” And Steve Rogers is seeing more of the venom and terror of the Black Widow than he ever has.

He swallows, “Hospital level.”

She runs.

The entrance to the hospital wing is full. People in shock form clumps, like clotting blood in silver foil blankets. Ash covered people sit on the floors like they have been too tired to do anything but slide down the adjoining walls. A child is screaming into the shoulder of a man, twisting its head back and forth avoiding the gaze of a medic attempting to assess what is clearly a compound fracture. And yet despite the shriek it is quieter than everything that has come before.

He is shirtless. Thick gauze padding covers his side, held to his skin with a large net tubular bandage. An oxygen mask is affixed to his face, fogged with humid breath. A saline drip is hanging above him. He is motionless.
“Ma'am,” A young woman in SHIELD issued scrubs is saying, “Agent Barton is stable.”

“He's unconscious.”

“No ma'am.” The woman takes a step backwards, she is very young. “He did lose consciousness but recovered. He had to be sedated so he could be treated.”

“You sedated him?” She raises an eyebrow.

“Agent Romanoff?” a deeper voice intones behind them, “I sedated Barton.” The familiar looking man waves off the woman. He raises his gloved hands without offering them, “Byron Watson, we've met.”

“You've nursed Barton before.”

“Yes.”

“You sedated him.”

“I've nursed Barton before,” Watson says stripping the gloves from his hands and folding them upon each other. “He was trying to get between the surgeon and their patient. Despite an open wound and rapidly dropping pulse ox. Seems to believe he has a medical degree.”

“No,” she says flatly, “just a masochistic sense of heroics.”

Watson selects a suture pack from a nearby tray. He hums very slightly as he does so.

She doesn’t move. From here, with a little concentrated effort, she can make out the even rise and fall of his chest. She can see the single bubble of yellow tinged fluid following the rubber line into the crook of his left arm.

“You might need stitches for that.”

Her finger tips unconsciously follow to where Watson gestures. “I'm fine.”

“Good,” he answers without pause, “because the citizens of the former Sokovia don't have a SHIELD agent's aversion to medical help. You can't wait in here. Unless I sedate you.”

“Agent Watson.”

His full lips curl into a half smile, “Agent Romanoff.”

Across from the hospital wing is a series of rooms used a break rooms for the medical staff and pressed into service as debriefing suites when Agents could not be moved. The white coated metal slates of the vertical blinds divide the room into thin slivers of normalcy, coffee machines and mug piled upon each other. They do nothing to increase the normalcy of Wanda Maximoff. She is small but stands in clear contrast with wild hair and jarringly curling fingers.

“Stay away from me.” The girls voice spills its way out of her, harsh and fractured.

“Wanda.”

Natasha looks down the hallway at Steve Rogers standing a supplicant at the entrance to the break room.

“Steve,” she says. “Do as she says.”
“Natasha.”

“Rogers she's not saying it because she's in pain,” she says stalking towards him. “She is saying it because she isn't in control of the pain.”

He must ignore the static across his skin, the even-storm warning signs. “No one expects her...”

“She isn't just a girl. Believe her.”

Natasha pushes him back and down from the suddenly slamming door. The blast is more heat than sound but it begins a terrified scream from the new denizens of the Hellicarrier. The bent and ruined blinds clatter against the metal window frames.

And Wanda Maximoff curls up upon herself on a wind blasted nest of magazines, old files and lost property.

“She shouldn't be alone.”

“No,” she says, resting her head back against the door jamb. “But she is.”
Wanda Maximoff makes small cat like noises in the stillness. She is attempting to smother the roar of feeling, shutting down each wave of sobbing that tries to make its way out of her body.

People are being moved from the hall into other rooms, on to other levels by Agents whose jobs were once more logistics than enforcement. The Sokovians barely look at the two people resting their heads against the wall of a now ruined room. She’s seen too many people walk like that. She can’t remember not being numbed by it.

“You should get someone to stitch that up.”

It takes her more than a moment to turn her head and acknowledge that Rogers is speaking. “It's fine.”

“It isn't,” he says, “and you're smarter than that.”

Everything aches now, every muscle, facet joint, ligament. Everything aches. If she closes her eyes she is certain she will feel the stapes in her middle ear throb. “It can wait,” she says.

“Yeah...” he agrees quietly and rolls his head back against the wall. With no eye contact she lets go of the sharp flint that has held her upright. It seems to only increase the ache.

Eventually he interrupts the silence with the abrupt in breath that precedes all spoken thoughts, “Is there? Should I be?”

She doesn’t turn to him, just stares at the metal surface of the wall opposite, “No. There isn't anything left to do.”

“Never been any good at that. You?”

“Waiting?” she sighs and tries to imagine the concept free from purposelessness. She fails. “Clint is.”

“Barton?” Rogers asks, “I had to throw him off the medics?”

“That isn't waiting,” she says and it sounds as numb as she feels, “It's losing. Watch him on a rooftop.”

“Sniper.”

“Sniper,” she agrees.

It is utterly incomplete. The word conjures images of a hawk alone on a rooftop but does not create the way he can sit in a room, push his chair to the very brink of tipping and wait. It says nothing of the mindless, endless chatter filling up the spaces until the very air feel warm enough and safe enough to breathe your thoughts into. It does nothing to describe a man who will stand in the cold, dark, impenetrable void and count on the materialization of stars.

“Bucky was...” the warped reflection of Steve Rogers says.
“Barnes?”

“Yeah.” He rubs his knee, then fails to stop himself from digging his fingers in to the flesh of it. “Guess he still is.”

She wonders if he is imagining a different kind of waiting, one in ice.

“I should talk to her,” he says when he has freed his hand.

“No,” she says. “I will.”

She grasps at the sharp flint again and forces herself to stand. The door swings open with the lightest of touches. The Maximoff girl has decimated to locking mechanism with her show of power.

“Wanda Maximoff.”

“I said leave,” the girl says from her corner. She barely raises her head making her appear all eyes and brown hair.

Rogers doesn’t move from behind her. He is standing guard and Natasha is unsure who he imagines he is needed to protect.

“Do you need to be sedated?”

“You think you can drug me?” Wanda Maximoff’s voice rises like she believes them to be ridiculous.

“You are not a child.” Natasha snaps sharply. She sees the quick jolt of the girl’s head. “Are you in control of this or do you need to be sedated?”

“Control,” she mimics, the reddish tinge to her eyes swirling and diminishing. “This is SHIELD?” she asks and in her accent Natasha hears her brother.

“What's left of it,” Natasha answers honestly. “My partner is sedated.”

“Your partner?” the girl says, there is a knowing twist to it.

“Your brother is in surgery. He,” she says of Clint, “wasn't in control of it.”

“My brother.”

“Are you in control of it?”

The girl looks up for the first time, “For now.”

Natasha examines her, her fingers clench at the thin dress that barely covers her knees. “Do better.”

“Natasha,” Rogers warns.

Natasha does not blink. She does not look at Rogers.

The girl stares back, “I am in control.”

“An agent will keep you apprised of your brother's condition.”

“Yes.”
Natasha nods once. “On behalf of SHIELD, I thank you for your cooperation.”

She turns on her heels, letting the door swing shut and leaving the enhanced in the dim room. She walks past Rogers and onwards.

“Romanoff.”

She rolls her shoulders back before turning to face him, “It will be hours before we are in US air space. Use the time. Talk to Stark,” she says finding her head shaking, she has nothing more to offer him. “Once we land, the work won’t stop.”

“And you?”

“I will not be making a report to my defunct agency.”

“Barton?”

She doesn’t turn her head to the entrance to the hospital wing. “Is unconscious.”

“I have a question for you. You don't have to answer.” He smiles. It is an insufferably kind smile despite snark, “Of course, I feel like if you don't answer it though, you're kind of answering it.”

“Rogers.”

“We've got hours.” He shrugs, taking a step forward, “You don't have to make a report right now.”

“That's not a question.”

“Barton?” he furrows his brow. “What are you afraid of?”

She doesn’t pause, “What are you trying to do?”

“Be a friend.”

“A friend?”

He doesn’t blink. He is getting better at not blinking. “Yeah, someone,” he smiles again, “told me your friendship would make me live longer. I believe him.”

Steve Rogers watches her sink into a wider stance, she wraps her hand around her wrist. He shakes his head. He gives a small aborted sigh before gesturing to the room where Wanda Maximoff sits. “She might feel alone right now but she isn't. You aren't either.” He steps forward again. “Even if you aren't in control.”

“I can't wait in there.”

Can he see it? Clint can always see it. Can he see that she is fighting against the urge to run?

“Okay,” Rogers says articulating every sound. “Do you want to?”

Natasha blinks.

“Yes.”

“Okay,” Steve says, “Well, apparently, an agent will keep you apprised... if you wait right here.” He punctuates this with a firm point to the spot that she stands on.
“Steve.”

He swings round with another shrug. “If you're still an agent, my credentials should still be valid.”

Chapter End Notes

Hello Readers,
(Who continue to be the best readers in the known universe) Thank you for still reading. I know it hasn't been easy at times when I have gone months without updating. We are at the pointy end now. Thank you so much for getting this far and taking part in my attempt to fix Age of Ultron.
Keep reminding yourself that dead is only dead when all the holes are sown up and all the blood put back in.
We should be finished soon.
x
“There you are.” Stark has a black eye and a variety of superficial cuts. He looks as though he has been dashed against rocks, in truth, he has been dashed repetitively against the inside of his suit. He manages a swagger, ignoring his injuries for the counterfeit appearance of emotional stability.

“I thought,” he continues, “the bracing debrief from ‘former employee’ Maria Hill and ‘Not actually dead man’ Fury was something we were going to do ‘together’.” He provides air quotes in case the unyielding sarcasm fails to register with Rogers or herself.

Rogers looks at her for mere milliseconds before turning to Stark. “They can take my report.”

Stark hasn’t seen or hasn’t understood, “And what about you, Widow? Not feeling the paper work?”

Behind her, the fingers of her left hand press into the sleek wall. They seem to think it would be possible to find a hand hold, a place to grip and keep her rooted to the spot.

Steve Rogers doesn’t look back at her, there is a minute twitch of his jaw. “Romanoff, you’re keeping an eye on Wanda?”

“The fantastic two? Why do they need?”

Rogers shakes his head once, “Just Wanda. Pietro’s in surgery.”

“What?”

“GSW, chest and legs.”

“He was…” Stark’s voice cracks a little, “the church, he was there. Right? I thought he was there.”

“There was a civilian who didn’t get to the boats.”

“A child,” she says, her voice sounding foreign to her.

Rogers shifts, blocking her infinitesimally from Tony Stark. “Clint went after him,”

“Barton?”

“Pietro gave them cover.”

“They’re… he’s in surgery?”

“His heart stopped several times. Wanda’s…” Rogers indicates the room further down the corridor. He seems to want to expand but as he turns back to Stark whatever was to be said next, dies.

“Waiting,” she finishes for him.

“Maybe we don’t all walk away?” Tony says like an echo.

"They’re working on him. I’m not giving up just yet."

“Barton? Banner? Thor?” He looks between them both like a spectator at a tennis match the hardened appalled look never leaving his face.
“Clint’s…” she says and finds herself needing to swallow.

“Barton reopened his wound. He’s out but fine.”

“Banner…” she looks up into Tony Stark’s eyes. He has shifted, choking his concern and anxiety in clenched fists and a scowl. “Is gone.”

“Gone?” Tony’s mouth contorts, a kind of hysterical smile cutting through the anger for a moment. “What?! Jolly green is practically indestructible.” He looks back over his shoulder like he expects Banner to appear.

“The lullaby…” she says as he turns back to her, “I failed. The ‘other guy’ took the jet and Banner.”

He nods almost compulsively, problem solving as fast as his brain will allow, “I can track…”

“It’s in stealth mode.”

The calculations flicker into flat rage in the hazel iris of Tony Stark’s eyes. “Why the hell were you trying the lullaby!?”

When he moves on her, Rogers materializes between them. “Stark!” he growls, pushing the shorter man back.

“The lullaby isn’t manipulation!” Small white flecks of saliva fly out of his open mouth as he pushes forward again imagining he could force his way through Rogers. She rocks back on her heels, immediately despising herself for the display of weakness. “You think you can…”

“Stark! You weren’t available, it was a tactical decision.”

“Tactical?!” Stark says, not taking his eyes off her. “To send in little Miss Trustworthy here?”

She does not look away and she feels, for a moment, only relief. Even if Stark's anger is fraudulently directed, it feel like relief.

“Right, that’s it,” Rogers barks. His forward step pushes Stark off balance. "Step back. Now!" he adds redundantly. With an arm braced against Stark's chest he turns to her, "Romanoff, wait here."

Tony Stark grunts dismissively before pulling away from Rogers, turning his back on her. He walks further up the corridor, his hand clenching and unclenching. Natasha hasn't moved from her position against the wall.

The muscles in Rogers' jaw contract. "I want updates on Maximoff and Barton," he says. She doesn't nod. "Stark!"

"What?!”

"Flight deck. Now."

Her hands are shaking. She breathes in trying to make her body submit.

She paces because there is nothing else to do. She paces, in part, because it is what Clint would do. Just now, she isn’t certain she knows what Natasha would do.

She doesn't look up when the male figure approaches, she remains focused on the entrance to the hospital wing and the room that houses Wanda Maximoff. She doesn't look up until he is close
enough, in her peripheral vision, for her to note the color of his suit and the cape that hovers incongruously above the flooring.

"Miss Romanoff?" He speaks with JARVIS' voice.

"Yes?"

The man dips his head slightly, his hands cupped behind his back. "We haven’t had the chance of a formal introduction."

"Battle so rarely lends itself to one."

"Of that," he smiles as though it is the first time he has ever done so. It is a placid smile, a saintly one, "I will have to accept your expert opinion."

In the center of his forehead, a yellow stone catches the light from the overhead florescent bulbs.

"You were in the cradle."

"Ah, that is more complicated than a simple affirmative would allow."

"And now you are alive and one of us," she says bluntly. His face is a smooth reddish purple, a pattern etching across his cheek bones.

He tilts his head, "Again both suppositions are more correct than not and yet…"

"Do you have a name?"

It easier to examine the synthetic human in front of her than to let Tony Stark’s accusations continue to circle.

"Your companions have taken to calling me ‘the vision’. " He doesn't explain the strange honorific, he only passively returns her examination.

"And what do you call yourself?"

The Vision appears to consider this. "I have not yet decided."

"A name is an important thing," she answers. "You don’t appear to need medical assistance and an introduction is pleasant but hardly required." It must be the way the new man speaks like JARVIS that makes her think of words like befuddlement. “Why are you here?"

"I was informed that Miss Maximoff was…”

"You rescued her?"

His eyes don’t behave as human eyes would. If she looks closely she can see the pupillary response is more like clockwork than the mercurial sphincters of humans hinting at emotions unspoken. And yet, he pauses too long. He blinks, despite, she is sure, the lack of a biochemical imperative. “She was inaccessible to any other…”

Natasha is certain there is many things this new being is leaving out. He is honest but not forthcoming.

"Agent Romanoff?" The young nurse calls from five feet back, bouncing on the balls of her feet.
Natasha turns slightly, leaving her gaze on Wanda Maximoff's rescuer. "Yes."

"I was told to tell you when Agent Barton was regaining consciousness?"

"Thank you."

The nurse is staring at the caped man standing before her. "You can see him. If…"

"Yes," Natasha says before turning on the nurse. The young woman's voice cuts out, her eyes widen and she turns moving as fast as is professionally possible.

The Vision is still watching her, making a frank and open assessment of her. "Her brother is still in surgery," Natasha says as she moves down the corridor. "She may be grateful for your company, though I doubt she'll admit it." Before the entrance to the hospital wings she pauses and indicates the ruined break room. The man turns and looks, for all intents and purposes, as though he did not require any assistance to find Wanda Maximoff.

She steals a nearby stool from an unattended suture bay and sits beside him watching his eyes move beneath his thin blue veined eye lids.

"Nat?" he mumbles beneath the oxygen mask. He tries without opening his eyes to grasp her hand.

She places her hand over his and watches the thin seam of blue peer out from underneath his brown lashes.

When she opens her mouth she finds that, "I told you to get your ass on a boat," is the only thing she can say.

"I.." he attempts to push the oxygen mask aside and only manages to slide it halfway across his lips, "mmpf."

"I told you," she says her voice coming out as a thin whisper.

"Yeah."

"You…" she says and Clint Barton's eyes close. He squeezes her hand once.

"Yeah," his voice catches in his throat. When he opens his eyes again he asks, "The boy?"

"Alive, with his sister."

"Kay," he mumbles again fiddling blindly with the oxygen mask, "I should…"

He tries to sit himself up.

"Lie down," she orders, "You're injured."

"They…" he says as she returns the oxygen mask over his nose and mouth, "someone stuck me… something… good."

"Blood loss, altitude and your friend Byron."

"Byron?"

She almost manages a smile, "He's on to you, Hawkeye."

When he opens his eyes again he manages to roll his head on the pillow, turning to look at her. "The
"He’s alive, head wound and some altitude sickness."

He shakes his head firmly, "The other kid," he says, the frustration evident in his voice even as his eyes blink tiredly. "Tasha… I got him killed."

She sucks in her breath. "Pietro Maximoff is in surgery. He made a choice. You got his heart started again."

His hand goes limp against her palm. "The girl?" he croaks before his eyes roll back too quickly for his eyelids to shut.

She leans forward and whispers into his ear, "Is safe."

"I told her…” he mutters.

"I told you to get your ass on a boat."

"Tasha…"

"You can barely keep your eyes open."

"Just restin’ em"

Her eyes are stinging. "Go back to sleep"

"Natasha…" He reaches for her, she takes the hand and slips it back into the bed.

"Sleep."

"’m sorry," he says and she isn’t sure who he means to apologize to.

She wants to wrap her arms around herself and hold her skin together. She stares at his grayish coloring as he breathes. She feels as though she is forcing him to take each even breath, that she counts out the seconds of inhale and exhale, she feels exhausted. She does not wrap her arms around herself. She sits like a statue, made of marble and carved in blood.

"Apologies for the wrong things don’t count, ястреб."

He is asleep. She rubs her knuckle across her cheek bone and stands.

At the Nurses station she addresses an agent in navy blue scrubs, "What is the latest on Pietro Maximoff?"

"Maximoff?"

"Bullet wounds," Natasha says.

"Yes. I’ll…”

"Check?” she says, raising an eyebrow.

"Yes, ma’am."
He startles awake. He doesn’t think he screams. He only hears the gasp. He hopes he didn’t scream. Tony Stark raises his eyebrows at him from across the room. He’s slumping against the glass, arms folded across his chest.

Clint blinks several more times bringing the rest of the room into focus.

“Sleeping Hawky awakens,” Stark says.

“Barton, good to have you back.” Rogers says from the seat nearest the bed. Natasha is standing behind him and three seconds into consciousness he can feel the waves of tension rolling off them all.

He tries to pull himself up. He stops when the sharp angular pain of his side brings him back into his own body with a sickening start.

“You tore yourself open again,” Stark says. “No cradle now. Helen Cho is….” He closes his eyes, it may be a wince. “Impervious to monetary incentives.”

“Recovery is going to be slower,” Rogers says shifting forward on the chair.

“This is getting to be a habit, Barton. Might need to raise it in your next performance review.” Stark says ignoring the way Rogers shakes his head. He has a black eye.

Clint swallows against his dry throat, “The lack of superpowers and robot suits was always gonna raise the insurance premiums.”

“Well,” Stark says shrugging but not moving from the wall, “at least we don’t have to pass on the news to a Mrs. Hawkeye and a nest of hawklings.”

“Stark,” Rogers says, a look of disgust passing over his face.

Clint feels like he walked the room where his two dads were arguing and has watched them plaster on their fake smiles and ‘hey there, buddy’s.

Clint tries to smile though he acknowledges it may be more of a grimace. It seems to him that Tony Stark needs a smile right now. Something in the way he talks about passing on news to imaginary loved ones that turns him a shade of pale green.

“S’alright Cap,” Clint says, “I’m not planning on leaving behind a widow anytime soon.” Natasha is standing very still behind the Captain, she doesn’t shift her eyes from the middle distance. There isn’t even the faintest suggestion she has even heard him. “So, I need to wait on nature to fix me the old fashion way? I can do that.”

“The boy you rescued is safe. He’s with his sister. No other family to speak of. She’s very grateful.”

He nods and tries to untangle his hand from the drip line. The fact that it is in the back of his hand and not higher up or in his chest telling him more than Rogers or Stark seem to be passing on.
“Maximoff?” he asks. He has a half-remembered memory of Natasha, angry and shrapnel scratched, telling him about surgery. He is holding on to that. He isn’t going to let them see what happens if he has to let go of that.

“He was in surgery for over six hours,” Rogers says all earnestness and jaw line.

“He’s alive,” Clint says, deciding for that question that the wisp of his own blood suspended in the catheter needs his full attention.

“He’s in a coma,” Natasha says, it is effortful masquerading as effortless.

“But he’s alive, right. He didn’t…” He coughs. “He’s not dead.”

There is nothing like a pause full of meaningful eye contact to make Clint feel like he is twelve years old and isn’t gonna get to stay in this home. Rogers finally gets up the courage to answer him. “If he wakes up in the next 72 hours they say he’ll have his best chance for a recovery.”

“His best?”

Natasha’s stance finally shifts but she still doesn’t look at him, “He might not wake up, Clint.”

“There was massive trauma, blood loss, oxygen to the…” Rogers tries to explain.

“Where’s the girl?”

“The girl?”

“Wanda,” he says. It’s more a croak than a name. “His sister?”

He supposes none of the others really think of her as a girl, but she looks more and more like a child to him. She looks more and more like an echo of another girl, different hair, different eyes but same shuddering refusal to be what she was before and just enough left of herself to pull herself clear.

The dreams are falling apart. They time jump and melt like his attempts to follow psych’s lucid dreaming instructions has introduced Salvador Dali as director and not in fact put him in control of the nightly horror show.

Yeah, he knows who Dali is. He’s not completely stupid. It’s just more comfortable in that space.

Before he opened his eyes to find all the parents pretending they weren’t fighting…

The boy’s eyes were gray blue and every tiny spark of electricity had gone out in them but he couldn’t help but think they looked more like a storm than just the word blue would describe.

And then he was back on the Ultron forsaken rock of Sokovia and the boy was being mouthy and full of holes and when he fell he wasn’t the boy anymore. And when the girl’s scream was all he could hear in his head it wasn’t that sharp Sokovian accent it was low and oak aged.

“She’s with him.”

“She’s okay?”

“Physically, she’s fine.”

“Okay.” He nods. “Okay.” He nods again trying to push back against Loki’s obvious imagery. Dropping anvils and thinking he was subtle, Clint thinks, Thor’s pissy little brother has all the artistry
of an 8th grade theater student. You’d think I couldn’t get there on my own, asshole.

Rogers clears his throat, “There’s going to be questions, meetings…”

“Consequences,” Natasha says. Her voice makes him look up.

“Consequences,” Rogers agrees. “The medical staff want you on bed rest for now. We’ll take care of it.”

“Ultron?”

“Ultron, Sokovia, Maximoffs, Banner,” Rogers lists tiredly.

“Banner?” he says, sticking on the last member. Natasha doesn’t move. Natasha is obvious in her immobility.

“Someone,” Stark says and moves clear of the wall for the first time since Clint opened his eyes. “Said something to him that made him run.”

“Stark.”

He isn’t as good as Natasha is at tracking body language and those tiny little expressions between expressions but he is certain Stark’s upper lip curls into a snarl before it shifts again.

“I’ve got work to do on an old tracking program.” He doesn’t look at Natasha. He barely looks at Rogers and when he looks at Clint it may well be an inch to the left and up a bit. It may well be at a slight shadow on the smooth white wall behind Clint’s pillow. “Barton, glad you’re back with the fully infused.”

Clint throws up a half-hearted salute. It seems the right thing to do. A little cover for the forced cheeriness in Stark’s parting words.

Even when he’s gone the room remains uncomfortably silent and unaccountably warm.

“Banner?”

Rogers looks up at Natasha for no more than an instant but the request is there, “The Hulk got Natasha to safety. He didn’t revert. It seems the other guy had other ideas.

“So, no Banner,” Clint says, “the others?”

“Good. All good.”

“It’s only you who persists in getting injured,” Natasha says and it sounds like a dry huff. It is supposed to sound like a dry huff.

He frowns. It pulls at a dried cut at his hairline.

“Captain, do you mind?” he asks, catching Rogers unaware, “I need a minute with my partner here.”

“Of course,” Rogers says straightening up in the chair. “I’ll check in later. Let you know if there’s any news.” There is something a little giddy and untarnished in his tone all of a sudden, like the failures of their mission and the exhaustion of a battle might be nothing if Clint Barton is about to make some declaration of his love. Or perhaps that’s what Clint is reading into the quickness with which he vacates the most expensive, least private hospital room Clint’s ever been in. Perhaps, but probably not.
“I'd appreciate it.”

Natasha Romanoff follows Rogers to the door. She’s wearing brown leather and dark wash denim that echoes her tac suit. She pushes the door shut as the Captain leaves.

“Barton,” she says as she turns.

He frowns.

“Fuck that,” he says and he knows it’s a growl.

“What?” Anyone else might believe that she isn’t doing any of this intentionally. She is that good. Anyone else would be wrong.

“I said,” he says and the growl only gets thicker in his mouth as he hauls himself up right against the wishes of muscle tissue and lies that pretend to be muscle tissue. “Fuck that.”

He pushes his feet off the side of the bed and steadies himself with clawed hands to swing round. “I’m not supposed to be walking around so do not make me get out of this bed, Natasha.” He swallows his groan. “I will not hesitate to throw you under that particular bus.”

She doesn’t move.

She has this way of not moving that makes you think she is in control, she is relaxed. He scrubs his hand across his face, once again getting the drip line caught and giving himself a sharp, painful tug to go with the low-grade desire to throw, the fuck, up. One day medical is going to put the damn thing in his right hand instead of his left.

“You know,” he sighs, “we had a good thing going when only one of us was crazy with guilt and whatever else at a time.” She doesn’t move. “So, I guess it’s me who’s gotta put on the big boy pants.” He lurches to his a left a fraction, makes to put his barefoot to the floor beneath the bed. He doesn’t bother to hide the smirk when she shifts her weight. He looks up again, “You tryin’ to fix this by pretending you don’t feel things? Nah, don’t answer that. Tell me...” He smiles wanly, “Aw hell, tell me all of it.”

She blinks. She folds her arms across her chest, “There is nothing to...”

“Tasha.”

She wets her bottom lip, “It can wait.”

“You think?” And the idea of anything waiting seems so ridiculous that it comes out through his nose. “Seems to me we oughta...” he sucks in a breath and rethinks his words. His shoulders roll forward. “You think, you added shit to your ledger?”

“A city fell out of the sky,” she says and finally her incredulousness overtakes the flatness in her voice.

“And that sure as hell wasn't on you!”

“It's on all of us.”

She sounds tired but she makes her way over to the bed and Clint takes it as a small victory.

When she is seated next to him he turns, “By that measure, Loki, Hydra, they're on me.”
“Clint.”

“I'm not saying there isn't an argument to be made...” His mouth twists into an asymmetrical smile.

“Clint.” She shakes her head.

“Yeah,” he says, “What else?”

“Banner.”

“What's going on in there about Banner?” He lets his shoulder graze her own.


He doesn’t think about it, his head just shakes, “It was a risk from the beginning.”

“I failed,” she repeats. “Banner didn't trust me.”

“How did you get off that rock?”

“Rogers...” She lets herself frown.

“Yeah, Cap told me. Hulk, right?” He waits for the very slight nod, “Pretty gentle this time round?”

Her frown deepens, “The beast didn't turn the...”

“Banner's been running since day dot, Tash. Trust me,” he says and god, he hopes she will give him that much. “I was a runner once. If Banner doesn't trust someone, it's Banner.”

Natasha nods again but he can’t tell if it’s in agreement or if she wants to put an end to the discussion. There are tiny seams in her skin held together with medical grade glue. Someone, he’ll need to thank later, has forced her into getting medical attention.

“Stark,” she says softly.

“Yeah. What did you see?”

“He said...”

He cuts her off. “Don't tell me what he said. What did you see?”

“Anger.”

“Even I picked up on that one.”

“He's isolating,” she says and he gives her a sharp nod.

“Has he called Potts? Is she back?”

“The dust in the atmosphere.”

“Right...” he hums out with the memory of the white heat and the ashy rain, “Iceland volcano times...”

“She can't fly,” Natasha says quickly.

“And he's...”
“Building, drinking, avoiding,” she says, turning a little more on the bed. “Taking too little responsibility and too much in turns.” She is comfortable in this dissection.

“And you thought he wasn't a perfect fit for SHIELD,” he smirks.

Beside him Natasha stiffens, “These people aren't strays.”

“You think I don't know that,” he says, his skin prickles, “really?”

“You behave as if a warm bed, some food and a pep talk and these people will...”

“Be redeemed?” he snaps. He rubs at his face again. “It's okay,” he says more softly, “call me on my shit. It's one of the many reasons I love you. That's what you were gonna say, right?”

Natasha nods but she does not let go of the tension that has made its way back into her skin.

“Some people are irredeemable. Some people can't be saved? You're probably right. And you're probably right that this work shouldn't be for finding that out but... why can't it be? Why can't we give people a shot, to... to...”

“Do better,” she finishes for him.

“Natasha, you were... hell, you are redeemable. Best shot I ever took was on you.”

“Clint.”

“No,” he says at the sadness in her voice. He cannot stand the sadness in her voice. It scratches and bites at him. “Look, I know you don't want to hear it. I know you can't let yourself believe it but... I gotta believe we aren't the worst things we've ever done. Now more than ever.”

“You trust me,” she says and it’s like she is trying to read his skin, his eyes, his breath. She is completely bare and watching him for any sign of dishonesty.

“Aw hell,” he says unable to look away. “To the ends of the earth, Nat.” She hasn’t covered the slight shadows under her eyes with makeup. She hasn’t done anything to diminish the red that rims her eyes. Her hair tangles about her face. “I don't think it's me that you're worried about.”

“The others,” she blinks a tacit agreement. “I, I shouldn't care.”

He smiles, “I used to be able to count the people you'd trust on one hand, with mittens on.”

“I kept the circle small.”

“Barely room for me in there when we started.” He shrugs, feels every muscle in his back. “I dunno, I'm not gonna tell you it isn't a risk. And trusting... they're all broken people... some more than others, I mean Thor's a god prince alien so, you know, it's relative. What I mean is,” he says hoping his mouth knows what he means, “you start counting on people and you've gotta deal with the fact that they might...”

“You almost died,” she says so sharply he almost flinches.

“Yeah,” he tries to smile again, “but I'm still here. That's just how good I am.”

“No, you are lucky, Pietro...”

He closes his eyes at that name and then wishes immediately that he had not. “Yeah I am. I don't
think I'll be repaying that debt anytime soon.”

He can’t swallow. He tries to shift on the bed.

“Debt?”

“Sure as fuck feels like one,” his voice cracks open. He can’t hold the force of it back anymore. It heaves out of him in a blast of air and pain. His forehead is in his hand before he can move again.

“Shit,” he says muffled with mucus and fat, ugly tears. His shoulder draw forward and shudder with his in breath.

She pushes his hand away from where he was furiously swiping at tears. Her hands are smaller, are softer. Unless you knew her hands intimately you would never know to feel for the roughness in the curve of her thumb. She turns him and ignores his crumpled hopelessness, “You don’t sound like you,” she says with a crease between her brows.

“No, I sound like you.”

“I almost lost you.”

“I almost lost you,” he says as she drops her hands. “You think, once this heals up,” he gestures to the padding and sealing that juts from his side. “We can just go somewhere and not talk about how fucking terrifying that is?”

He knows it's wrong the moment it leaves his mouth. He never knows before, if he knew before he would have shut the fuck up.

She looks away. She looks away like all that glass and metal has suddenly become the most interesting thing in all the world. She is all of an inch from him. Lined up on hospital beds, like construction workers on girders eating lunch, like children on the back seat of yellow buses. It's intimate but declares the distance as loudly as if she was halfway across the room.

“A city fell from the sky...”

“I know.”

He isn't as good as she is at tracking body language but everything about her is screaming don't touch me. And everything in him is screaming hold her, hold on to her.

He knows what she will say next, he feels it encroaching, stealing his breathing room. But as soon as it's visible he can see his choices just as clearly.

He could demand. He could say again, this is how I love you and I need, I require, I demand to be loved just as I love you. He could believe he is allowed to define the parameters of love. He could say what he could bare. Clint Barton could tell her that her version of this is wrong, that if she could not even give him the fiction of leaving this job, this endless battle, that it proves she does not love, could not love or at very least does not love him. He could ask Natasha Romanoff to change or pretend.

Maybe for a moment he could argue himself into believing that her unwillingness yield in everything, in anything, is neglect, is abuse, is a lie. They could have the same argument.

“There is work to do,” she says and turns her eyes back to him.

They could have the same argument.
This is how she loves.

This green eyed woman hell bent on atoning for every sin she ever committed, allowing herself no quarter and no rest. Natasha Romanoff’s love is unnamed and so unselfish as to appear almost cruel. She loves them all. She loves them all with a breathtaking unsentimentally. She loves them all and though she is to him the most honest woman in the world she would deny it because she could not imagine that it could be framed it with that word.

But she says that she loves him.

Stupid, broken man that he is, she says that she loves him. Who is he to say that her love is not real. Not enough.

He wishes it were more selfish. He wishes it felt more like his love. But he does not wish it away.

He makes his choice.

The argument ends here.

If it makes its way out of her shaped in words like trust he can see it for what it is.

She is sitting there, curled into as much of a ball as she will allow herself even alone with him. She has stopped fighting so hard to remain numb and now she looks pale and small. Her eyes glint with the tears she won’t allow to take form. If it hurts him when his love is not returned in the same way that he gives it, he can now make out the very edges of how much it hurts her to have her trust thrown back at her.

He nods once. “There will always be work to do...”

She closes her eyes; her head drops and something not too far from grief overtakes her.

So he does the only thing he can, he puts his arm around her and pulls her in close.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry again about the delay getting this chapter to you. I hope it's length makes up for it a little. Oh and this is where 200 Park Avenue falls in the story.

http://archiveofourown.org/works/9056236
He is in the boy’s room again, hunched asymmetrically in a hooded sweatshirt and a hospital gown. There is a red blotched rising lump on the back of his hand. He has yanked the drip line from his left hand and abandoned his bed and the rolling stand in the first room she seeks him in.

He doesn’t talk to the girl opposite him though they wear identical scowls. She sits silently across the prone body of Pietro Maximoff. She has laced her hand into the flaccid hand of her brother. She stares, like concentration alone could open his eyes. For all Natasha knows, her particular brand of concentration just might.

He stares at the girl.

Wanda Maximoff shifts away from the entrance before Natasha should be in view. Natasha knocks. It is too many seconds before his positioning likewise alters in recognition of her presence.

"Your nurse needs to change your dressings Barton," she says, punctuated by the bleeping of monitors.

His voice is thick when he answers, “Yeah, right.” He rocks himself from his seat certain abdominal muscles refusing to do their part lifting him.

She finds him here more often than not. She returns after cleaning up or one of the endless meetings, committees, excuses for people shocked by their smallness and lack of control to unleash their fear and rage on someone more deserving than they feel. He is only ever missing when his seat has been claimed by the tall purple Jarvis voiced man who has shed his cape for clothing that appears 3D printed from the pages of a J Crew catalogue.

Clint doesn’t say anything to the girl as he leaves. He brushes past Natasha and out towards the nurses station.

She is almost grateful that he is sitting vigil over Pietro Maximoff this day. When he stays in his room, the one he calls the pigeon coop, he is inevitably corralled by Tony Stark, the only one of the remaining Avengers that he is not actively blaming for his own failures.

She is tired of the sudden drop in conversation and temperature whenever she comes upon them. The Tower is now a high school she never meant to attend.

Wanda Maximoff curls away from her presence too. It irritates her more than it would on a less spite colored days. She curls away from the doctors, Stark, Thor and even Rogers.

“‘The only people you have spoken to for more than two or three words have been Clint Barton and Stark’s new metal man. Why?’”

She doesn't turn to face her and when she starts to speak her voice is tinder dry, “Clint Barton is simple.”

“Clint Barton is not stupid.”

“No, no, no,” the girl says suddenly as though Natasha had snapped the words. “I am tired, I have not slept, yes? I spend…” she breathes in twisting slightly. Her eyes sit in dark hollows. “I listen for Sokovian. I am not thinking English. Simple. прямой. прост. I mean not stupid. uşor. He is…”
“His mind is quiet,” Natasha says. Maximoff talks as though she is listening to one conversation and answering in another.

“Quiet? No, quiet minds are empty,” she says sadly, “are maybe you never come back.”

The pause is too long she doesn't complete her thought.

“His is simple?”

Wanda inhales and fixes her eyes on Natasha. “Your mind is sharp?” she shakes her head, “difficult, it… like battle. It hurts.” Wanda Maximoff does not elaborate on who is hurt by Natasha’s mind. “His mind is… I do not know to say. There is nothing, he thinks… he thinks but he would not say.” She nods once her hand has clenched tighter around the peaked hand of her brother.

“The Vision’s mind is complex. Yes. But clear. Simple patterns on top of each other. They do not hurt. Now everything hurts.” She drops her head, “I wish to listen for Sokovian now.”

“I’ll leave you.” Natasha turns, leaving the twin to her solitary search for faint scraps of a familiar language.

“He loves you,” the girl says.

Natasha stops short. She clenches.

“That is not for you. Stop looking into our heads.”

She thinks of the dark recesses the girl had dug up from her mind. She thinks how very painful just her thoughts could make this girl's world.

Wanda sucks in a sharp breath and hurriedly says to Natasha’s back, “He loves you. Not the fiction. I made that harder for you to believe. I am sorry.”

Natasha walks away.
“You look beat,” he says.

“No, I don’t,” she answers before sliding herself into the nearest chair.

He smiles tiredly and shakes his head. “You got some tells, Red. Not many but some. I’d be a shit partner if I couldn’t pick up on them. You wanna slip into something more comfortable? Hell, you want the bed?”

“Felling cooped up?”

“Me?! What gives ya that idea?” He adjusts himself, turn towards her like each movement must be calculated. “Tell me about the world, Tash…” he says wistfully, “do they still have sunsets.”

“No, they’ve replaced them with meetings.”

“Fan meet shit,” he says with a raise of a single eyebrow.

“Oh no, the shit flinging hasn’t even been added to the agenda yet. It will be months before they even decide who oversees sanctioning us.”

“So these meetings?”

“Posturing. Yelling. Threats. Fearful people with limited power.”

He nods. “And you’re…”

“Chamberlain,” she sighs out.

“Appeasement?” he asks a fraction of a second later with a slight smirk on his ashy lips.

“They don’t know who is in charge.”

“Of who?” He frowns.

“Exactly,” she purses her lips. The glass wall opposite the bed has a smeared finger print, the oils of someone’s hand staining the sterility.

“Huh?”

“This… all of this…” she gestures finding words completely inadequate. “Follow it back. SHIELD was rotten but…”

He reaches out across the table that rolls over the bed for a second his concentration is entirely on a paper cup of water that sits at the edge of his out stretched fingers. She could easily push the table closer or stand and hand him the cup but the effort of the day makes these reflexes slow and she watches how his longest finger curls around his target dragging it closer. The world is quietly reducing to the thickness of his nails and the crease in the surface of a paper cup.

“Someone was in charge,” he finishes for her, the cup now securely in his grasp. She blinks and
looks back up. It isn’t the words she would have chosen but his tone is just as defeated.

She gives his answer a single sharp nod. “I have my own questions.” Questions she can’t ask without handing the red face men and the taut women any power she still retains.

“So ask them,” he says with a shrug.

“And whom do I ask?”

He blinks, his mouth hovering over the rim of his cup, “What does Cap say?”

“Is that who we follow?”

His silence is filled by the stillness of his features and the endless calculation behind his eyes. Finally, he answers her, “I don’t know.”

He sips the water. It stains his bottom lip.

They lapse into further silence and she is grateful that he doesn’t say he followed her here. The thought has been pinging like a sonar echo with mundane regularity for the five days since he woke. Follow it back and it ends with her foolish desire not to be parted from him. Follow it back and it begins and ends with her need for Clint Barton at her six.

“She says you love me.”

“Huh?”

“She says you love me,” she repeats as though she had said it the first time with intent and forethought.

“No, I heard you…who says? I don’t…” His brow furrows, drawing solid thick lines beneath the disarray for dirty hair.

“The Maximoff girl.”

“I haven’t,” he says, moving in the bed like he intends to take action as soon as he decides what action to take. “What? We don’t talk. Jesus,” he winces and rights himself again, “we just wait. How the fu… she been playing in my head?” his shoulders pull back, he tenses. He thinks he knows what action he will take. “Little retribution?”

“Nothing so sinister,” she smiles and knows it doesn’t reach her eyes, Clint stills anyway. “She isn’t, for all her misguided fury, Loki.” Natasha doesn’t sigh when his eyes dilate. “She must have to work to control what she ‘overhears’. The destruction of her homeland and the loss of her brother may be impairing that.”

A muscle in his jaw contracts but she knows he is mentally standing down, “She just… what? She just said that to you?”

“I believe it was an apology, of sorts.”

“Sorry, I fucked with your head?” he says with a wry tone that is poor wallpaper for the rawness in his face.

“Perhaps.”

“Perhaps?” he repeats with a complete lack of wryness.
Natasha sighs. She pushes the table away from the bed and manhandles his leg away from the place she intends to sit.

“Wanda Maximoff tried to unravel my sense of reality,” she says, resting herself in the warm indent left by his body.

“And blurting out my secrets makes up for that?”

He doesn’t ask her about the red hued dreams that Maximoff put in her brain. He looks at her like he is more worried about his special burger technique than the girl knowing about the men he has killed, the woman he loves, the Norse god who still controls his dreams. She knows enough to know that even this is an escape hatch he leaves for her.

She smiles, perhaps a little cruelly, “Perhaps.”

“Is this no straight answers thing a woman thing, a Slavic thing or just a spy thing?”

She bares her teeth at this, “I could tell you but I would have to kill you.”

“Good, put me out of my misery.”

“Misery?” she says dropping her voice into a sickly-sweet purr. Clint Barton rolls his eyes.

“I know,” and he yawns, large and opened mouthed. “Don’t really get to play the misery card with…” he pauses, doesn’t bother with the gesture. “You know even with the kid lying next door, I swear Stark is the one who looks the most…”

“He’s avoiding Potts.”

“He’s avoiding you,” he says pointedly before his long fingertip reaches for the seam that runs down the outside of her thigh. “I’m not even gonna ask how you know that.”

“I’m not the one person whose good opinion matters to him.”

“Rhodes? Happy?” he says voicing his list as she brushes his hand away. “No, I guess you’re right. He stopped being Ironman for her.”

“He tried.”

He doesn’t pull his hand back. It rests on the tangled blue and white of the blanket waiting for permission.

“Sure, the smarts and the money look like superpowers but he’s still human. ‘I tried’ is about the best any of us has got to offer.”

This room is a nightmare for the likes of them, exposed and minimal. It lacks corners of any defensibility. Its sight lines are absurd. The constant hiss of air-conditioning refuses to be ignored. The endless half heard bleating of machines in other rooms scratch at half remembered, anesthetic warped emergencies.

“Do you think he believes that?”

“I think if he did he wouldn’t be here, he’d be over the other side of the world with a strawberry blonde piecing him back together.”

“The dust…” She looks up again. His eyes are on his hand, on the space between his hand and her
thigh.

Slowly his gaze returns to her face, “He’s got superpower lookin’ smarts.” The annoyance in his voice speaks to how often he has been the sounding board for the billionaire. Clint Barton is tired of listening. Clint Barton is tired of listening being the only thing he’s good for. “He’s not even trying.”

He is wrong, of course. But an injured hawk is a frantic, angry beast.

‘What is he working on?’ She places her hand over his. There is a reason that all raptor first aid begins with ‘restrain the bird’.

“You don’t know?”

“I only look like I know everything, Hawkeye.”

He huffs, “He talks about an old tracking program. He talks about trying to integrate Friday into the system better. He talks about land he’s bought upstate, keeps calling it a campus.” Down the hall, at the nurse’s station a buzzer starts and stops. Clint flips their hands and grips her hand beneath his. “It’s the stuff he doesn’t talk about… the meetings, the legion, Potts…” he says and she feels him squeeze some kind of plea into the palm of her hand.

“He’s…” she says and then there a muffled voice through the wall.

They both freeze as an alarm erupts through the air.

“Shit!” Clint is hauling himself upright with no regard for his injury.

“Wait here,” she orders as leaps from his bed.

“Like hell!”

“Clint!” she snaps from the door.

“Like hell, Natasha,” he says.

A nurse is running towards them both. A red light flashes overhead.

“Get your Doctor!” Wanda screams from the open doorway. Natasha’s hair lifts against her skin and the distinct smell of ozone overtakes the sick smell of antiseptic.

Chapter End Notes

This story is not forgotten or orphaned. I am continuing to write when I have a chance. Unfortunately as I have been told recently my hobby has become writing clinical notes and my inability to feel anything but guilt about any behaviour that is not hiding in my bed or working has delayed the ending of this story. It’s going to drip and drab from here on out I am afraid but I will finish it! Thank you to everyone who has stuck it out with me. I owe you all a lot more than this. -A
“Wanda!” she says, she grips the girl’s face between her hands. “Do I need to evacuate the building?”

The girl’s eyes flash, echoing the red of the alarm. She wrenches her face away leaving red lines where Natasha’s fingers have lain.

The medic has used the distraction to enter the room.

“позвовите доктора,” she says over and over slumping back against the wall Natasha has pushed her against.

“Natasha!” Clint snaps suddenly from behind her. Her name is partially swallowed by the running feet and swirl of the alarm. She rounds on him to find him pointing at the bed.

Pietro Maximoff’s eyes are open.

Natasha steps back.

The alarm cuts out and staff flood the room. Wanda Maximoff barely acknowledges her, pushing through the medics to hunch at her brother’s hand.

Clint’s hand is wrapped around hers and tugging her back before she can do anything more.

“She’s dangerous,” she says numbly.

“Not right now,” he answers, his hand is cool and wrapped around her own. He doesn’t let go. Inside the room, machines are shut off and people speak in declaratives even when they are asking questions.

He pulls her back.

He pulls her back into a supply closet, hits the light switch with his elbow and bars the door with his own body.

“Why did you tell me what she said?”

“Clint?” she says taking a step back towards the suture kits and intubation tubes. The florescent light reflects in his eyes making them almost mercury save for a blue corona.

“She said I love you. You knew I didn’t tell her that. You knew she wasn’t ferreting around in my brain. You know I love you,” he rattles through his deductions and then he rests his forearm against the shelf, “You know that.”

Natasha lifts her chin, “I know that.” Outside the closet, the footsteps have stopped running, the voices have returned to a murmur. Her skin no longer prickles.

“So why?” he asks, the crevasse between his eyebrows deepening, “How is that an apology?”

Natasha licks her bottom lip. He takes a step forward. “She said you love me and not the fiction.”

“The fiction?”

“The layers of...”
“That’s what she calls it?” he asks his voice dropping further into the range of vocal fry.

“What?”

“Natasha...” he says, close enough that she can feel his body heat and smell whatever soap he has used to shave, “they aren’t that separate from you. Wouldn’t cost you so much if they...” He shakes his head and his hands wrap around her shoulders. “You think it’s fiction?”

“I...”

“Did it work?”

“Did what...”

“The girl’s apology?” He slides his hands up and down her shoulders like he is trying to keep her warm and safe. His voice is low and guarded. “She tried to unravel reality, right? That’s why the slip.”

“The slip?” she asks. She lifts her hands, holding him back with her palms against his shoulders. The chewed-up rope from his hooded sweatshirt pressing into her left palm.

“You go all widowy?” He looks down at her hands. “Start making decisions that aren’t about you. Aren’t about looking after you... you know this right?” he says placing his own rough palms over her hands against his chest. “That isn’t new information.”

“The slip,” she echoes.

“That’s how...” he swallows down on his words but does not look away. “You slip under yourself.”

“Beneath the widow.”

“No,” he says making her eyes snap upwards. His hand is on her cheek now. “Beneath you.” It shifts, cupping and then his thumb is against her lip. “It’s still you. It’s all you.” He sucks in his breath. “Natasha, did you think I only loved...”

He kisses her then. His mouth on her forehead, hot and human, and then his mouth is on her cheek close to her ear and then he dips lower, pressing urgently against the corner of her lips all the while holding her face in his hands. “Natasha,” he sighs.

“Don’t,” she says.

He stops, frozen save for the falling of his hands. “Don’t what?”

“Don’t pity me,” she says and it catches as it leaves her mouth. She pushes away from the shelves at her back.

“You think this is pity?” he says, a sudden smile creasing his cheeks. “Fuck, Tasha!” he says, his head shaking his disbelief. “The kids awake. I didn’t kill him. I didn’t take him from...” he gestures to the door at his back.

She kisses him, parts his lips with her tongue and feels him give.

“You’re here,” he chuckles against her mouth. “All of you. It ain’t pity.”

“What is it?” she says into his open mouth. Their chins are tilted down and she forces her feet into the ground despite an urge to wrap her legs around his hips. 
His mouth hovers over hers, he searches her face for an instant, “I get this moment, Natasha Romanoff.” He kisses her neck. “I’m gonna take this moment,” the curl of his smile is pressed against the raised surface of a vein. “The kids awake.” He breathes hot air across the surface of her skin. She sighs as her hands find the dressings still beneath his clothes. “The world isn’t exploding and I love you and you love me.” His words curl their way into the small hairs at the nape of her neck. “That’s a good noise,” he chuckles again, “I love you. I love you.”
an indecently methodical way

Her hands edge over the dressing trying to avoid the wound as her mouth attempts to secure what remains of her concentration. Clint’s hand is under her shirt climbing gently towards her breast. He suggests direction with his weight alone moving her backwards towards the only open space in the tight closeted room.

Something not particularly heavy and covered in sterile plastic packaging falls from a shelf as his shoulder grazes past. He does not turn his head, eyes closed and mouth fixed to hers.

A narrow counter hits her at mid-thigh but Clint continues his pressure, a coarse hand at her hip urging her up onto the shelf. She twists away from his panting mouth.

“Clint, we can’t.”

“As the woman who….” he thrusts his tongue back into her mouth. She tugs his hair pulling him momentarily away from her lips. He looks too pleased with himself. “Hotel balcony,” he says through lips stained with her shade of red. He puts his hand over hers tangled in his hair and busies himself with her mouth once more.

Natasha arches, “There is a whole floor of medical staff out that door,” she says as he pouts against her skin. “Not to mention Maximoffs.”

“Done thinking about the kids,” he says pulling the neck of her t-shirt down and capturing the cup of her bra between thumb and index finger

“Even the mind reader?”

“Either she’s already had a cortex full or she’s too distracted with speedy…. Natasha,” he sighs, it is hot and wet. “I’m done thinkin’ about the kids.”

“You’re injured,” she says and it is swallowed by his mouth.

“It’s worth it.” It feels like he is using her mouth to make the points of articulatory contact. He is good at this, needy without being desperate.

“Clint.” It comes out a whispered moan. A shape she did not intend for her breath to take.

“All you gotta say is you don’t wanna.”

“I…” Her hair is a mess. Her t-shirt stretched out as he kneads a hastily bared nipple. She knows her pupils are blown, dark circles drowning out the natural green.

“You wanna?” He stops. His mouth on her breast, he stops, waiting on her agreement.

“Yes” And she does.

“Thank fuck,” he says gratefully, pushing hair from his own face like he is heading back into the mines. He parts her legs, stepping between them and pressing the lack of containment his sweat pants offers against her.

She takes her bottom lip between her teeth with the familiar sensation of heat and relaxation melting its way from beneath her navel into the hollow place that the thickness of his hips now widens.
His mouth is sucking the thin skin that lies across her jugular. His hands making quick work of the unseen zip at her hip and bearing three inches of skin to the air above the low waist of her underwear.

Natasha pushes the hoodie from his shoulders as he tries to gain access to what is beneath her underwear. She stifles a small grunt of annoyance as the duel goals conflict, the sweat shirt tangled around his forearms and the fabric of her black trousers refusing to slip beneath her backside. He chuckles into her skin, blows a puff of air on to the saliva damp bruising he is attempting to make before yanking the neck of his t-shirt up and over his head.

He grins, his hair a wild nest of spikes and dirty blond colours.

Clint grips the material at her thighs and tugs as she pushes her hands into his shoulder lifting upwards for her trousers to come away. He plants a kiss on the inside of her knee as he moves back into position and she rolls her eyes. If he sees he gives no indication instead preferring to stroke her through the damp surface of her underwear with hands both roughened and too gentle. It makes her want to bite him. Sharp and bloody. He seems to know this and carries on in an indecently methodical way to spite her.

She holds his eye contact refusing to twist her mouth or look away and give him any indication he is winning. She braces her hands on the surface next to her, ignores the ruined T-shirt pulled down over an exposed breast and the cramped closet and the unlocked door. She concentrates on him alone, full kiss swollen lips, eyes that give no hint to their natural blue and a smirk barely anything but perverted.

The sound outside the door is muffled but there is no mistaking the cadence and tenor of that voice. She's annoyed at herself for flinching.

"Stark," she mouths, still refusing to yield what high ground can be maintained with Clint's fingers dragging her arousal across increasingly translucent cotton.

He leans forward his lips not quite touching hers. He whispers and it's low and a tad menacing. “Not the name I wanted to hear…”

"No," she hisses back, “Outside.”

In response, Clint raises an eyebrow pushes aside the cotton and penetrates her with long index and middle fingers, “You bastard,” she says on an inhale.

“Hush now,” he says his fingers inside her and rough palm pressing upwards.

Things that are learned quickly or not learned at all will dance their way to the surface no matter how much your world view may collapse down into a single gaping wound, the light filtering through debris or even sometimes the leather of your partner’s hand rubbing up against a sensitive nub of nerve endings. When you attempt to control your breathing in some form you create friction and friction creates noise. Clint Barton knows he needn’t cover her mouth and at this moment Clint Barton is a bastard.

She lets her mouth loosen, her tongue relaxes and breathes against the building knot of tension as the indistinct sounds of Tony Stark seep through the door. Clint builds up speed, the wet sounds of his hand against her cunt ringing in their ears.

She won’t look away even though his level of eye contact is obscene in itself and she remains unconvinced it isn’t some kind of Clinton mockery of things he has said to her before. She draws
upwards, her every muscle tightening from the instigating pelvic floor. She can’t move her hands now even if she wanted to. Her back arches.

Clint withdraws his hand.

His joyous grin is the reason she knows she has done nothing to prevent her desire to make him bleed from openly spreading across her face.

Without ceremony or words, he pushes her legs and the sweatpants from his hips exposing his hard and weeping cock. His thumb swipes across the surface of his head and then he thrusts himself into her.

His first thrust rocks her back against the wall. She narrowly escapes hitting her head and bares her teeth in retaliation. His hands press her thighs apart not allowing her to twist her legs around him and gain some control of the pace he sets up.

There is the friction of him, thick and ribbed sliding across stretched muscles and there is the friction of cotton caught between lips and him. There is humid air playing its way across bared skin, nipples, throat, thigh not covered by large hands. A curl of sweat, beads behind her ear and traces the ghost of his mouth on her neck. And all she wants now is to ride the release he might bring her.

She starts to shake, a shudder that seems entirely divorced from her and yet entirely her. She expects him to grin again, the feral, wild, gaming twist of his mouth that has preceded his every move here today. Instead it becomes something almost sweet as he releases her thigh and brings his hand and mouth to her cheek and then as the second shudder moves its way through her he forces his mouth on to hers and lets her gasp into him.

She clenches on his cock, his determined thrusting not slowed in the least by the sudden confinement. She slips forward on the counter, his cock’s angle changing abruptly within her. His grunt is in her mouth and through his nose against her cheek. And then she is done, her body walking the very line of pain as she curls and shakes against the hardness of his chest, his neck, his shoulders.

Clint carries on, breathing hot breath into her mouth and thrusting a rhythm and blues pace into her. Outside the murmur of voices dies away and Natasha closes her eyes.
“Hey there,” he says. He is sitting on the hospital bed like it’s a king size in the penthouse suite and not a functional prison. Tony Stark is all arms folded behind his head, unbuttoned waistcoats and a nonchalance that reads as anything but to Clint’s eyes.

“Tony.”

“So, your girlfriend,” Stark says, sliding his legs off the bed, “she works for me?”

Clint tugs his t-shirt down over the newly changed dressing and doesn’t bother to look up. “I don’t have a girlfriend, Stark.”

Tony sighs like he is pained, “That’s what I get for going the tact route.” He stands up. “Not a girlfriend then. Boyfriend? Side piece? Employee with benefits? I was naked, and I fell?”

“Stark?”

“Funny story,” Tony says walking towards him. His face saying the story is not particularly funny. “Maximoff and co are reunited, alarms going off. Vision not fully comprehending the wallishness of walls and when everything settles, petal?” He stops short in front of Clint. “No you.”

“Right.”

“It’s like, nothing behind the eyes.” Tony waves his hand in front of Clint’s face, “SHIELD teach you that or was it being picked up for petty theft one too many times?” He raises his eyebrows, pauses for effect and Clint gives him no response. “I don’t actually need a confession my fine feathered friend. JARVIS might be gone but this tower reports to me. Your absence was noted. Your presence in the supply closet was noted. Thanks for cleaning up.” His voice takes on a harsher bite, “Next time find a place not full of sterile equipment.”

“We done?” Clint asks. He stands still but lets his hands hang loosely at his sides.

“We done,” he says, his upper lip curls for a moment and he turns on his heels. “Tell your fuck buddy to fuck on someone else’s time.”

It rises quickly, it always does. Frustration and anger like an itch just far enough below the surface of his skin that he has no recourse but to feel the untenable heat and clench down on the red colored empty scream, “You pissed at me? Fuck Stark,” he snaps as Stark turns his eyes wide. “Call your girlfriend,” Clint spits

“My relationship is none of….”

“…None of my fuckin’ business? Thank fucking Christ.” He throws his head back, “You think I’ve been glorying in my role as your… girlfriend experience?” He barely pauses to take in his next breath, “Tony Stark everyone! Women want him, men want to be him. Tony Stark, just as fuckin’ human as the next guy, when the next guy happens to be me. You fucked up, your best friend ran and you’re hiding in your shiny fuckin’ tower pretending The Visions JARVIS, your bots are as good as having Banner in your corner and a broken-down archer is just as good as…”
He knows he is ranting, knows half of what he is saying makes no sense at all to anyone not in his head in this moment and yet in this moment all he wants to do is yell out the hot burn that sits like a mist in his brain. It’s the worst of him, it’s the recklessness, the defiance, the need to hit back at anyone who might be lookin’ to control him, it’s too many days spent in an open hospital room, it’s watching people fight and knowing you’re not in it with them and right this second, it’s Tony Stark thinking Clint would just take it. He stops then, forces his shoulders to lower, shakes his head as a single bitter guttural exhale escapes him. “Man, call your girlfriend. Suck it up. Ask her to forgive you. Ask her to get righteously angry at Nat, at Cap, at Banner for you.”

“One fuck in a broom closet and you’re a relationship guru?” If anyone ever looked pale with anger it was Tony Stark right now. “Spare me,” he says stepping back into Clint’s personal space.

“And spare me the Freudianly weird jealousy, Stark.” Clint growls back stepping forward just to refuse to concede his ground. “You don’t care what I do or who I do it with. You’re f***ed off ‘cause you had no one to talk to, when you felt like talkin’. Plain and simple.”

Tony Stark is smart enough to know when he would lose a cage fight, he steps back. Clint can see him hiding his loss of ground with a swagger and expansive hand gestures. “If the shoe fits.”

Clint purses his lips and gives a sharp shake of his head, “I ain’t embarrassed about where I’ve come from and I’m not worried about my intelligence. You wanna get in my face, pick a different button to push.” It’s only half a lie.

She smells like bergamot. A hint on the air that catches in his throat and reminds him of the tea she drinks when she Natasha and only Natasha and she is warm at the doorway not three feet behind him.

“Stark, Barton you can hear you growling all the way to the nurses’ station.”

“Romanoff,” Stark says not looking over his shoulder at her despite addressing her, “you want to tell your comrade no one here is looking to fuck him.”

He can almost hear the small smile on her lips as she answers, “I think not.”

Clint doesn’t turn around. He continues to stare down Tony Stark. “I’m not your shrink, I’m not your emotional support network and I’m too f***in’ over it to tell you to stop pretendin’ you don’t know what a girlfriend experience is.”

“No Barton, you’re not a shrink, you’re not a friend, you’re a below average employee and I swear to…”

“I quit.”

Tony Stark’s spiteful grin stutters on his face, “You what?”

Behind him, he can feel Natasha come away from the door jam.

“Clint,” she says softly. He can’t tell if it’s a rebuke, a warning, a plea.

“You quit?” Tony says incredulous, “You quit being an Avenger?”

“Living the dream, right?”

“Clint,” she says again in her same soft low voice and he wants to turn around but if he does, if he does right now he may want to take it back and he can’t see a way to take it back.
“Consider me retired,” he says and then knowing it’s not the right thing to say, “Sorry Nat.”

“You can’t quit,” Tony says, his disbelief has brought him to a standstill. With the rage fading beneath his skin, Clint can see the familiar roil of abandonment like water beneath Tony’s eyes. For a moment, Clint almost wishes he could say to the man, ‘Oh you too? They left you too?’ He shakes it off. They don’t live in that world and that’s not his job.

“Retire,” he answers hoarsely.

“Aren’t you going to stop him from…?” He looks at her now, makes it the woman he has been ostracizing since Sokovia’s job to save him from his mistakes. “Nose, spite, face?”

It’s not because of Tony Stark. But you’ll never tell him that.

Clint waits on her reply not allowing his equal desperation to show itself.

“No.”

Annoyance and contempt flicker across Stark's features before his eye gaze shifts back to Clint. “You’re giving up… this, all this, for a bunch of chickens? Because I called you out on the work place sexual harassment lawsuit waiting to happen?”

“You’ve been harassing someone?” she says archly.

He rolls his eyes though he knows she can’t see them, “I’m giving up all of this… notoriety and almost dying… and fancy finger food and if you’re getting that this’ not ‘cause of the regular invasions of privacy Avengers Tower seems to be built on, that’s not on me. Tony call Potts. Get in the best jet you have left and pick her up from where ever she’s been saving your company’s ass this time. Talk to Rogers, talk to Thor. Hell, get Thor to fly Potts here.” He turns then, sees her standing in the doorway, widened stance and her hand circling her wrist. “And Tony, lay the fuck off Natasha.”

“Clint.” And this one is a rebuke.

“Yeah, I know,” he says, “shut up, you get mouthy when you’ve been cooped up too long. Someone had to say it. You’re not responsible for Banner any more than he is.”

“That’s not…” she begins

“. . .it is. So, I’m gonna pack and you and you,” he gestures, “can pretend you apologized without actually apologizing and get on with shit.”

“Barton, you’re still injured,” she says, unreadable.

He shrugs. “Yeah, that’s never stopped me before.”

“You’re letting him do this?”

Natasha looks back at Stark and in her most precise tones she answers, “I don’t make his decisions.”

She doesn’t follow him.

He pushes his remaining clothes into the duffel. He stops to put a grey sweat shirt aside. He briefly considers making the bed but quickly decides against it. Clint lifts a scrunched pillow from the bed and drops it to the floor. He collects the knife from its indented place and slips it into his boot. After another cursory glance around the room he has never considered his, he listens to the silence and sits
on the edge of the bed. His back begins to ache when he stands too long, abdominal muscles refusing to support him. The room smells like his old socks and windows unopened, there is no bergamot in the air. He puts the sweat shirt back in the duffel.

He is in the kitchen stealing a purple mug he'd taken a shine to and a bunch of those little pods of coffee to put in a machine he hasn’t bought yet for a place he isn’t sure he is headed to. When he looks up she is there, dwarfed by the doorway and face swamped by big all too understanding eyes.

“You were expecting someone else,” she says. Sokovian like Russian makes women sound like their voices are made of rich molasses, he decides.

He gives her a smirk, but his voice is flat, “Hows about you stop asking questions you already got the answers to?”

Maybe she nods, but Wanda Maximoff is so still he forgives himself for not being sure, “You’re leaving.”

“Yeah.”

“It’s your job.”

“It was.”

And in that second, he can see what she’d be like as your little sister. Her nose wrinkles, still framed by the fine but heavy hair perpetually around her face. “But you’re a hero, you can’t just…” she insists.

“Girlie girl,” he sighs out, his hand is still full of green, gold and purple lidded pods, “I’m no hero besides, there’s plenty of you to fill my shoes now.”

“Me?” she asks but she tilts her chin upwards and he knows he’s got her.

“You wanted to fix the world before, right?”

“We were foolish,” she says darkly.

“Only way into this job.” Well, that a bloodshed, and she’s got that down too.

“You assume much.”

“Yeah.” He puts the pods down on the counter, pushes his palms into the surface of it letting his arms take some of the weight off his still complaining separated abdominal muscles. “Still, reckon I’m right on this one. You and lightening.”

She blinks. “He is not entirely back.”

“Comas, they take it out of you,” he agrees. They’re still rating Pietro Maximoff on the Glasgow but he makes little gains each day and Clint, for one, thinks he can’t have come away with just running as his superpower and maybe just maybe he can heal just as fast. Clint, for one, thinks the universe owes these kids this one.

He shakes his head a little, “If you… watch Nat. She’ll show you how to stay alive out there.”

“Because I am a woman?” she says sharply.

He huffs at that, “You’re a kid and she’s the best. Look, I gotta go. Tell your brother I better not see
“Are you hoping she will follow you or are you hoping she won’t?” she asks turning back when she gets to the door.

“You tell me.”

“I have stopped asking questions I already know the answers to.”

“Yeah?” he says and runs his hand from the back of his neck through his hair. “And I don’t give answers when I don’t know the answer.”

Chapter End Notes

It had to happen if we want Clint to be in the right place at the right time for Civil war and well he doesn’t do well if he spends too long in medical we know this.

Apologies for the ongoing delays but this will get finished and I will respond to all comments but Жизнь прожить — не поле перейти

I hope you all know how much I appreciate your reading this and how important you have become in my life x
She is standing in the foyer, her hip cocked just enough that she doesn’t suggest aggression. She is a black widow if she wants to be aggressive it is going to come as a surprise attack. Her right hand holding one end of a key chain hangs loosely at her side.

He breathes in deeply when he sees her, stops in place, doesn’t grin. He lets his duffel drop, she can see his snap assessment there is no point in bearing the weight for the discussion. He knows she has had him sized up from the very beginning and there is no way she doesn’t know more about his injuries than he does, he tires quickly and that duffel contains everything he owns that isn’t in storage under assumed names.

“So…” he opens with.

“Do you know where you’re going?”

“Got some idea,” he shrugs, its still obvious in its asymmetry.

She tilts her head, “Did you think you’d be riding the subway to Iowa?”

“I didn’t think of it all the way through but I at least know that,” he grins a little, catches himself and looks back up. “Look, Natasha this isn’t…”

Natasha shuts her eyes, “I know.”

“You do?” he asks stepping forward.

“You’ve been halfway out the door since Loki, since Coulson.” His pupils still dilate on that name.

“I shouldn’t have done it that way.”

“Let the medical and in fighting get to you so much you went out on a tantrum or that you told your partner the same time you informed Tony Stark?” She takes in a breath, letting him dangle at the end of her sentence, “You’re right.”

His eyes scan her face. He does this from time to time, reading each pore and crease like she is a cue card designed to supply him with his next line. His forehead furrows as he asks, “You think Stark is gonna get over it?”

He wants to have not damaged Stark. He wants to have left with out making an impact on the genius behind Ultron, Sokovia, the real reason he leans infinitesimally to his stronger side. He could see twelve step ahead in battle and still would spend every moment of his personal life tumbling over his feet. Clint Barton remains the king of rage and regret.

“He says he’s over it now.” There is no part of Clint Barton’s face that suggests he believes that or indeed that he thinks she believes it. She sighs, “We’ll talk him round.”

Clint hunches, his eyebrows attempting to communicate disbelief, guilt and a toxic mess of self reproach and regret. What his eyebrows communicate in actuality is his inability to raise one separate from the other, instead he lowers one, looks up at her through his eyelashes like a kicked puppy and some how Teflon slides his way out from under her anger, her legitimate anger once again.

And he thinks himself free from powers.
“And you?” he asks.

He could be asking so many things.

“I still have work to do.” She lets her eyes drop.

“I’m not asking you to stop.” There is no plea in the words, no apology either. It’s simple, earnest as his vowels flatten out and his accent comes to rest in the indicationless generic Midwest of the country.

She’s a student of languages, she knows accents because they tell histories and secrets before you can claw into the flesh of words and behaviors. She speaks with an accent that isn’t her own and is purposeful in its ordinariness. She does not remember a time when she had a native language, an accent that spoke of home, a mother tongue. She came by her talent for unplaceableness through design when he was finding an almost identical one through twists of fate and rootlessness. She has learned to listen for the subtle changes in his pronunciation, the vowel shifts and softened word final fricatives that she doubts he is aware of.

She knows to listen for the notes of New York City that cut across his words sometimes a hint that he’s looking for a fight to make him feel less desperate. She has heard the music of Northern California and the south side of Boston climb into his voice whispering clues about where he is and who he has been. Clint Barton, from everywhere and nowhere with a voice like a patchwork quilt to her ears.

And now she knows he is already in Iowa, on the outskirts of a town somewhere in the state far enough away that his words don’t twang with Minnesotan hospitality or roll deep in his mouth with Chicago gruffness. She has never had her own accent, she was always someone else’s creation, but when she hears the other melodies slip out of his voice she knows with certainty he is starting again from the beginning.

She looks up again, “I know where to find you.”

“And you will… come find me, I mean.”

“Someone has to watch your back.” She smiles.

He doesn’t smile back instead taking a step forward, “If you need me…”

And he would, without her asking, she knows this now. And if she asked him to stay, he would march himself back to Tony Stark and through gritted teeth mea culpa his way back into the roundest hole.

She shakes her head, raises an eyebrow and asks dryly, “You think Stark would take you back now?”

“As long as you would.”

“They know where to find you too now,” she says, wincing internally at how hurriedly it sounds to her ears. “Are you sure, the outskirts of a middling town in Iowa is where you want to be?”

He grins then, the too good to be true, carelessly happy grin of just Clint, not Barton not Hawkeye not an agent or an avenger. Suddenly she is certain that he means for this to be the case. He has decided that they are his strays… god help him, somewhere in his soul he has made a billionaire, a relic of a lost time, a god, deadly lab experiments and an explosive scientist, his family.
“The Lions Club did an awesome job on that playground,” he says like he knows what she knows. He says it like it isn’t weakness.

“You need some pretend castles in your life right now?”

“Nothing creepy about a fully grown man hanging out…” he begins before interrupting his own joke. His hand shifts up to his head and he runs it through his hair from the base of his neck to his forehead and back. “I just know what I don’t need, seems like as good as place as any to… start again.”

“Take the car.”

“Who’s car?”

She rolls her eyes. “I didn’t lift anyone’s keys. The cars in Nina Reyes’ name. She won’t be reporting it stolen.” She presses the keys into his hand. “Don’t ride her hard. You’ve got access to cash?”

“Natasha,” he says. It isn’t an answer. She both hates and loves the way he says her name. He has too much power over that word.

She loosens her grip, feels the pragmatic core slide down inside of her. It almost sounds like it could have been whispered, “You should have told me. You should have told me what you were thinking.”

“I know.”

“Don’t. Don’t just agree with me.” She blinks hard. “We both know you weren’t thinking, Clint.”

“Natasha.”

He is still more than a steps distance away. There are three security cameras in the foyer obvious to the general public. There are two more known to staff. He could list at least three others almost imperceptible even to the best trained operative. Natasha knows the layout, the eyes and how quickly Friday could send all views back to her creator, she’s done her work.

“Take the car. There are dressings and a week supply of pain meds in the trunk.”

“I’ll call,” he says, his eyes shift quickly to the ceiling view and back to the edge of the elevator bay.

“Do you want me to pass on any messages?”

“Just the one,” he smiles softly, rolls his shoulders back and then with no shift in tone says, “I love you Natasha Romanoff. I’m gonna get my head straight and maybe get a real job but you and me, we ain’t done.”

“I’ll give Rogers the message.”

He chuckles, a warm rumble of sound before adding, “I think he’d be pretty happy about it.”

“We’re not done,” she echoes him.

“Not done. Nowhere near done.”

“Call.”

“Call, email, text, send flowers.”
“Do not send flowers,” she orders.

“That sounds like a challenge,” he says, lifting the duffel on to his shoulder.

She has done this alone before. She has even been on this so called team without him before. When he shifts his weight it should not feel like a growing hole.

“Did you know?”

“Did I know what?”

“When you saw a girl, a murderer, down your scope? You made a different call, did you know what would happen?”

He blinks a few times. Perhaps he had thought she would never ask.

“Know? You never know.” He pauses, crease deepening between his brow. “I hoped, I think it was a moment of pure hope. I just hoped for the best and was willing deal with whatever happened. It was the right call. It was the best call. I got a fantastic partner out of it.”

“Nothing lasts forever,” she says quietly.

He lets the sadness show in his blue eyes, doesn’t stop it from spelling out his thoughts. His weight shifts again and she feels certain he is determined to turn and leave.

He steps forward. He leans close to her ear. She feels his warm breath hit a curl of red hair tucked firmly behind her left ear, “I got a pretty good lead on one thing.”

“One thing?”

He kisses her cheek. She does not have time to turn into it.

He steps back, his eyes flicker back to the placement of the cameras but he smiles, lazy in its gentleness.

He shrugs. “I hope.”
She leaves the same day she finds Rogers and Stark convincing Thor to put the hammer in an elevator. This is not the reason she leaves. But it does make it easier.

The men group around the shiny silver surface of the elevator doors giggling like small children plotting the downfall of an adult caretaker. It would be hard to believe that they single-handedly brought about the ruin of a small nation state and manage to salvage what they could of that same nation state mere months before. This is the nature of humanity they could be as powerful, intelligent, cunning as the gods and then as capricious and flawed as those very same gods. She’d always preferred the ancient gods. They were somehow more honest. They were the gods that put a hammer in an elevator to prove an elevator was worthy.

She tells Rogers first. He smiles warmly and doesn’t ask where she is going just as warmly. He is surrounded unhappily by paperwork. He sits at desk he has claimed just as unhappily. She has heard him mutter that hot desking is dehumanising. She has heard him mutter about a need for unions. She can see the beginnings of a sketch in the margins of a memo. He hasn’t always caught them before passing them on to Hill.

Sometimes she looks at him and sees Clint’s coloring and the same powerful Americaness, she supposes they come by it by constitution rather than heritage and upbringing. What commonalities, few and far between, existed in 1930’s Irish catholic Brooklyn and 1970’s farmland Iowa shaped them so that Clint Barton could be the other man’s shadow, darker, distorted but twinned nonetheless. When Steve Rogers lifts his chin and tells her to come back because he needs her, needs a friend and someone to watch his back she doesn’t shake her head or obfuscate. Natasha smiles warmly.

Wanda Maximoff is in the gym, watching her brother and a physical therapist, who is braving a learning curve no hospital internship could have prepared her for, argue their way across mats. Every so often the male Maximoff’s frame shudders and blurs and he grunts as he tries to catch the metal bars. His speed has returned before any control.

“Stop being a baby,” Wanda says, “No one will believe you are 12 minutes older.”

Pietro snarls in Sokovian in response and takes another step.

“You’re leaving?” she says, turning slightly her left hand curling at her side like a nervous tic.

“Yes.”

“Will you tell him…” Wanda says before turning back to her brother, her long hair slipping down her back, “will you tell him we are fine?”

There is no point in chastising the girl about using her extra skills. Natasha isn’t even entirely sure that she has pried or that she has deduced. She smiles brightly. It has too much edge. “That depends on your commitment to training.”

“You know,” and Natasha can feel the curl of the girl’s smile, “I can move things with my mind?”
“And yet you lose on the mat every time. You cannot rely on one skill to the exclusion of all others.”

Wanda shrugs with one shoulder, her eyes still on her brother, “You’ll be back. I choose to avoid the bruises.”

“How is this one?” Her brother’s accent is thicker than hers.

“Pietro, it isn’t smart to antagonize a black widow.”

Even though he is slumped over the metal railings, actively ignoring the woman in the unflattering polo shirt hovering at his side, he manages a convincing apathetic look of disgust, “Isn’t smart to get shot.”

Natasha steps forward, standing at Wanda’s side as Pietro brushes off his physical therapist once again. “He is forgiven this once.”

“I remember this one,” Pietro says, “Tell me how can one be world famous spy?” His English is more broken since he awoke. His Sokovian contains more pauses.

“One can’t be.”

“They see you coming,” he smirks, “Be faster, little spider.”

“Fast is not the only tool, Pietro. Control, knowledge.” She raises an eyebrow as he lifts himself off the bars, “You will learn.”

“My brother thinks he does not want to learn.”

“Your brother thinks he has a choice?”

Wanda turns and smiles, “Not for long.”

“I’ll find you both when I return,” Natasha says. “Listen to Rogers.”

“Not Stark?”

“Listen to Stark. Make sensible choices about who to follow.”

“You trust us now?”

“Knowledge, control,” Natasha repeats. She gives a sharp nod.

Wanda sucks in air, turning to follow Natasha as she goes to leave. “Will you convince him to be a hero again,” she asks. Natasha wonders briefly how much of the girl’s ability to tilt her chin upwards, widening her eyes, making herself look younger, smaller, more vulnerable is calculated and how much is the learned manipulation that comes from the years of reinforcement of these behaviors. It works for her no matter the answer.

Natasha takes her own breath before answering. No matter the answer, Wanda Maximoff will soon learn to calculate her every move.

“No,” she says, “He never stopped.” She has an urge to reach out and touch the young woman’s shoulders. She ignores it. She turns on her heels, “Practice, Wanda Maximoff.”

“Don’t I pay your salary?” Tony Stark says fiddling with a cufflink.
“No.”
“You sure?” He squints up at her. “Not even with my massive tax burden?”
“Hill can reach me,” she widens her stance and wraps one hand around her opposing wrist.
“And Rogers,” Stark says lowly.
She raises an eyebrow in response, “Rogers knows to ask Hill.”
“And Fury.”
“Is dead.”
“And Barton.”
“Is retired.”
He begins searching through desk drawers. They are not his desk drawers. They rightly belong to Virginia ‘Pepper’ Potts who will be rightly annoyed when she finds whatever he is searching for missing. “So everyone knows where to find you except me?”
“Thor?” she smiles.
He huffs and proffers a small screw driver in the hand he has extracted from one of the open drawers. “He’s got an all seeing god tracker on all of us.”
“Hmm.” She tilts her head and presses her lips together, “you might be right.”
Tony Stark stands, stills for a moment. “Romanoff,” he says the downward inflection of his voice not enough to indicate he has finished.
She takes pity on him, a momentary slip. “Mr Stark, you aren’t alone.”
He blinks and she watches the minute contractions in the surface of his jaw, “Yeah, let’s not and say that we did.”
She nods sharply, “Tell Pepper I’ll send a postcard.”
He flips the executive toy on the edge of the large desk over and begins attacking it with the small screw driver, “Maybe I should retire, then I could send postcards too.”
It sounds like half a thought, it sounds as though he doesn’t mean for it to mean anything in particular. She wonders if it is meant to mean something.
“Didn’t you already try that?”
“I’m not allowed one relapse?” he looks up, his eyes are bright again, there is no bruising on his face.
“One?” she smiles.
“Aren’t you gone already?” he answers returning to the device still attempting to swing even in its prone position.
Her car’s chassis pings beneath her as loose gravel hits and ricochets. She is making a silver and dust
streak as she finds her way down the long private road. She has the skill set to approach and gain access without warning. The due diligence required to do so for the sake of a surprise seems an unnecessary expense. Time is not something she is willing to give up.

His sleeves are rolled up, his left sleeve sits lower, looser, at his elbow than his right. He has light green paint caught in a forelock of hair. She sees it clearly as he drops his paint splattered hand from shielding his eyes.

Her boots make an even rhythm on the solid, unvarnished wood of the new stairs. She drops her bag once she is on the porch it makes heavy landfall next to the unhooked and partly dismantled love seat leaving dusty spider web streaks on its resting place.

He lifts her in strong warm arms and as he looks up into her eyes her says, “You came.”

“I came.”

Her hands rest in his hair, tangled in his tangles. It has grown since she last saw him. His face is rough. He hasn’t shaved. The smell of his sweat fights with the smell of turpentine.

When he sets her down and pushes her curls back behind her ears, she says “We aren’t going to grow old here, raising fat babies and stepping on legos.”

He looks at her a beat too long even though the sunlight is in his eyes, “I’m okay with that.”

“Okay with it,” she echoes.

“Yeah,” he answers before she has time to pick apart the meaning of okay. “My future has you in it. That’s all I need.” He lifts her bag and stands straight both legs bearing his weight equally.

At the doorway, he stops. “Plus I was listening to these TED talks about the multiverse and in some universe there are fat babies and legos and in some universe there might even be fat babies and legos that are ours… in every universe though there is a me and there’s a you and in this one, this me found this you and he’s pretty okay with it.”

“TED talks?” she says and doesn’t think about the smile on her face.

“They weren’t kidding about watching paint dry,” he replies stepping into the dim light of the entrance way. His free hand rubs at the back of his neck, “I gotta get a dog or something,” he mutters.

She follows him into the cooler room, its air thick with new paint.

“Clint Barton.”

“Yeah,” he says dropping the bag and smiling, it like his body is loose and free.

She kisses him with certain pressure.

“I’m okay with it too.”

Chapter End Notes
It's finished. No really, after years and years of this... nonsense, this is the end of In a Marketplace or on Main street. Consider Age of Ultron as fixed as I can make it (I am sure others have done it better)

To all of you that have read this from the beginning my words will never be enough to express how much your support has helped me and shaped my writing, every comment has made me want to do better for you.

For those of you that only just discovered this story please remember that though this fic has just ended I don’t intend to stop writing and the people who comment on stories that are finished are fated for sainthood.

If you have kudos'd, told a friend, made a rec, or just thought nice things about my stories in the privacy of your own warm blankets I am endlessly grateful. This story has seen me through finishing my last degree, trying to find proper employment and starting to work in a demanding but endlessly rewarding field... I'm not entirely sure what I will do with myself now I do not have it to return to.

Clint and Natasha have become my friends, my alternate personalities and my role models, I fear them leaving me and yet I'm sure that they never will.

I hope... I truely hope you won't, dear reader, either.

Thank you.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!