**Arsenal**

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating:</th>
<th>Teen And Up Audiences</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive Warning:</td>
<td>No Archive Warnings Apply</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category:</td>
<td>F/M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fandom:</td>
<td>Iron Man (Movies), Captain America (Movies), The Avengers (Marvel Movies)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship:</td>
<td>James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes/Tony Stark, Toni Stark/James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Antonia Stark/James &quot;Bucky&quot; Barnes, Tony Stark &amp; Avengers Team</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Additional Tags:</td>
<td>BAMF Tony Stark, Hurt Tony Stark, Hurt Bucky Barnes, Post-Captain America: Civil War (Movie), BAMF Bucky Barnes, Time Travel, Brainwashing, Torture, Past Attempted Rape/Non-Con, Female Tony Stark, Past Child Abuse, World War II, Mentions of genocide, Mentions of Antisemitism, Past Rape/Non-con</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Series:</td>
<td>Part 1 of <em>We'll Meet Again (Some Sunny Day)</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collections:</td>
<td>2016 Winteriron Bang</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stats:</td>
<td>Published: 2016-10-07 Chapters: 2/2 Words: 26240</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Summary**

Two years after the Civil War that tore apart everything she’d bled to build, Toni Stark sacrificed herself for her newly-reinstated teammates and ended up stranded in the past. Freed of her name, her fortune, and her hostile ex-teammates, she built herself a life as an agent for the OSS, the American secret service, and, having nothing to lose, accepted a mission to infiltrate the newest player in the war: an organization that call themselves HYDRA.

Then, she met a young draftee with a dreadfully familiar face, and they clicked like she had never clicked with anyone before. By the time she realized she’d fallen for the man who’d cost her everything, it was too late, but she’d always been an all or nothing type of girl, and if she was damning herself, well then…might as well go all the way.
Hi everyone! This is my first ever contribution to a Bang, and of course I had to start with WinterIron!

I want, first and foremost, to say thank you to my two amazing artists, poedameron-tony and uchihana! Their amazing contributions really add something to the story, and I'm glad they chose my story to work on! You can find them here, and here.

I really wanted to make this story historically accurate and match the movie timeline at the same time, so I researched as much as possible, but there are probably still mistakes, which I apologize in advance for.

English is not my first language. Please be indulgent, but don't hesitate to point out any mistakes that might have escaped my attempts at proper editing.

The entire first part of this series takes place during World War II, which was definitely not a happy time for anyone: none of the opinions expressed by my characters or historical figures referenced in this story (namely, Hitler or his ilk) are in any way, shape or form my own. Also, neither Toni nor Bucky are light-hearted characters, so there will be issues, and probably a lot of triggers. I did my best to tag them all, but some might have escaped my vigilance.

See the end of the work for more notes.
Chapter 1

ORDER TO REPORT FOR INDUCTION

The President of the United States,

To JAMES BUCHANAN BARNES

Order n°326

Greetings:

Having submitted yourself to a local board composed of your neighbors for the purpose of determining your availability for training and service in the armed forces of the United States, you are hereby notified that you have been selected for service in the ARMY.

You will, therefore, report to the local board named above…

The letter fluttered to the ground, landing just a foot away from a pair of scuffed black shoes, printed characters staring up mockingly at the ceiling. For the longest time, the man seated on the bed stared straight ahead, features blank as he struggled to take in the fatidic words.

Drafted.

James let out a long breath and ran a hand through his hair.

He was being sent to war.

The perspective was daunting. Like everybody else, he’d been following the news, but he knew better than to think they wouldn’t hide the full extent of the horror. People died, and if they’d started
drafting, then it meant they were in need of men. Replacements.

Canon fodder.

James shuddered.

Bending forward, he grabbed the letter again, the paper crinkling between trembling fingers. God, what would his mother think? His brother and sisters? How would they get by if he didn’t come back?

James forced himself to scan the letter once more. He’d heard Herbie Johnson from the hardware store had applied for conscientious objector status and been granted it. Now, instead of going through bootcamp and being shipped off to England, he was a firefighter in New York. Maybe James could apply for conscientious objector status, too. But Herbie, unlike him, was part of a Dunker, and James himself had never been more religious than strictly necessary. His appeal would be rejected. If only he had Stevie’s constitution, he—

Steve. Oh God. James ran a hand down his face tiredly. Steve was going to go nuts. The little guy had been itching to join the army ever since Pearl Harbor, been rejected twice already, and here James was, his best friend, drafted and unwilling to go. Ice blue eyes slid shut as he tugged at a strand of brown hair.

Steve...couldn’t know, he decided. James knew firsthand how brave his best friend was. They’d shared a school bench since the age of four, had faced the same stupid bullies together, grieved and laughed over the same stupid and not-so-stupid things. Steve believed in fighting for the good cause. To him, there was nothing more important than contributing to the war happening overseas, and helping the people currently risking their lives for freedom.

Steve wouldn’t understand.

He had to think that James was going willingly, or he would pull that disappointed face that made James squirm like the days when he’d been caught with his hand in the cookie jar by his Ma, and James just couldn’t take the thought of his best friend taking him for a coward.

James wasn’t a coward.

He just knew if he went, chances were he wouldn’t ever make it back. He wasn’t stupid enough to think some weird luck would protect him from bullets and minefields. A derisive chuckle bubbled through his lips, high with hysteria. At least Steve was safe. Between the asthma, the color-blindness, and the weak physical constitution, there was no way anyone would ever label him anything but 4F.

Slowly, he rose to his feet. Breaking the news to Steve was going to be a nightmare. Hell, he thought
with a bitter smile, maybe, if he was lucky, Steve would be so pissed at him for “enlisting” behind his back that he would swear off their friendship, and then he wouldn’t care too much when army officers showed up at his doorstep. His stomach clenched in anxiety, fear racing through his blood. The small apartment was constricting, the walls converging on him, and he was on his feet and at the door before he realized it.

“I’m going for a walk,” he croaked over his shoulder. The hanger rattled as he ripped his coat and scarf off of it. Steve hummed, distracted by his sketch. He’d managed to find a job at a magazine, and work was rare enough these days, especially for an artist—that he was giving the gig his all. James frowned. Yet another issue he’d have to solve before leaving. They’d been sharing rent, but with him gone, he didn’t know how Steve would be able to afford the apartment.

The rush of cold air as he stepped outside was like a slap to the face. He tugged his scarf tighter around his throat and carefully tucked it into his coat, shoved his hands into his pockets. The winter had been particularly vicious so far, and he couldn’t help but glance enviously at the rare passersby who were obviously wealthy enough to afford fur coats. He walked down the street, nodding at the neighbors, hunching down as he tried not to think about the future, or what was left of it. He supposed it was a good thing he’d left home several years ago to live with Steve, and his family could handle their own.

The recruitment bureau was as dreary as it had ever been. Why his steps had led him there, he had no idea, but as he looked up at the looming structure, he couldn’t help but feel that the dirty stone was a sad reminder of what was to become of his existence. Two weeks from now, he’d walk in with a bag, and would only come out with a uniform and freshly-carved dog tags around his neck. Ready for boot camp.

“I’ve seen that face before.” He jumped, turned. The dame was shorter than him by a couple inches, with wavy brown hair—almost black—stopping short of her neck and tan skin. She stood looking at the building with a frown on her face, a dark expression haunting her features. Her eyes, he noticed when she finally looked up at him, where a deep brown, large and soulful, and her lips remained unpainted. She had to be one of the most beautiful dames he’d ever had the pleasure to lay eyes on, and yet, he couldn’t muster up the desire or the energy to flirt.

“Have you?” he muttered at last, barely remembering his manners as he noticed he’d been coming dangerously close to rudely ignoring her comment. He had no desire to talk whatsoever at the moment, but the mere thought of what his Ma would do to him if she ever caught wind that he’d been impolite to a dame—which she would, she always did somehow—was enough to make him answer.

“Conscription isn’t fun for anyone,” she observed, turning back to the bureau across the street, the flag hanging limply from the wall.

“At least you’re not subjected to it,” he snapped, wincing afterwards. “I apologize,” he added as she turned to him again, “that was rude of me.”
“Ha,” she scoffed. “What, you think I’m going to break because you spoke a bit harshly? I’m not some delicate flower, soldier. I guarantee I can take it.” James’ eyes widened at that, and she tensed. “What now?” she barked.

“It’s just...I’ve never heard a dame speak like that before.”

Some foreign emotion darkened her face for a second, but it was gone as fast as it had come, and then, she snorted inelegantly. “Of course you haven’t. I’m one of a kind.” They stood in silence for a minute, James pondering on the oddity that was this dame, sneaking covert glances at her. She was clad in a long black winter coat with a cream-colored scarf securely wrapped around her neck and an emerald green beret perched on top of her head. All in all, she made for a fetching sight.

“I’m James,” he said at last, extending his hand. She studied it silently, a strange, almost cold expression on her face. When she finally reached out to take it, her hand edged closer to his like she was afraid he’d attack her, but her eyes never left his, defiant and yet filled with some untold emotion he couldn’t put his finger on. Yet all of his instincts screamed at him not to move an inch, or she would be gone before he could blink and he’d never see her again.

“Toni,” she replied when he carefully clasped his fingers around her palm, careful not to squeeze too hard.

“Isn’t that a male name?” He frowned, and she shrugged, hand falling back to her side and shoulders loosening a little, although there was a rebellious light burning in the depths of her brown eyes as she replied.

“Anthony turned into Antonia when it became obvious I didn’t have the required parts.”

James had never been thrown off-balance so many times in a row. Toni’s language bordered on crass without really being so, but he supposed it was just a side-effect of her frankness. It was refreshing in a way, and it made a long-forgotten feeling of interested curiosity stir in his gut, one he didn’t think he’d ever come to feel again in the company of a dame.

“Well, my friends call me…” he hesitated. Suddenly, ‘Bucky’ didn’t sound right, as if the name would be wrong, too carefree, somehow, coming out of those lips. He said it anyway. “…Bucky.”

She looked up incredulously, but allowed him to brush his lips over the back of her hand before snatching it back and looking away in embarrassment. Puzzling, that. Hadn’t anyone ever greeted her politely? “No way am I calling you that,” she deadpanned. “James will have to do.”

“Alright,” he drawled, one shoulder lifted as the corner of his lips quirked up in amusement at her determination.
“Anyway, you look like you need a distraction,” she picked up again, “and I was on my way to the movies.”

“By yourself?” James blurted out, only to raise his hands in surrender when she glared.

“Yes, by myself. I’m a big girl, I can take care of myself, thank you very much.”

“Okay then, what were you thinking of seeing?”

She smirked approvingly, as if he were a good dog who had learned his lesson, and he couldn’t help but smile back. “Casablanca. It just came out, I heard it’s really good.”

She was walking already, every stride bringing her farther from him, and he could do nothing but catch up to her.

“Aren’t you worried I’m a bad fella?”

She cast a quick glance over at him, eyebrows raised, then looked back ahead. “Don’t worry, sugar, even if you tried anything, you’d be down before you realized it.”

“I think you’re underestimating me a little, doll.”

She scoffed. “You’re nowhere near tough enough to take any of what I can dish out,” she smiled innocently up at him, patting his arm. “But don’t worry, nobody is.”

“You’re very confident.” Now that he was looking, it was everywhere on her, in her gait, her posture, the way she spoke. This woman wasn’t afraid: she knew exactly who she was, what she wanted, and her place in the world. Yet, even as he watched, he noticed how her eyes would dart from left to right all the time, watching her surroundings for some kind of danger. For all of her bravado, Toni—and how come he was only now realizing she hadn’t offered a last name?—was nowhere as reckless as she tried to appear.

The movie was, indeed, good, and James found himself so deeply immersed in the story that he actually forgot about his problems for the duration of the show. They stayed until the projector turned dark, then exited the theater together. James wondered if he should offer his arm to Toni: as different as she seemed from the other dames, he was worried she would reject him, and be vocal enough about it that it’d be embarrassing to them both.

“Let’s go for coffee,” she frowned up at the sky as they stopped under the awning. “It looks like it’s going to start snowing soon.”

And indeed, the clouds were a dark, heavy shade of gray, dragging their fat bellies over the city. No doubt they would crack open soon, and it wouldn’t be a pretty sight. As they walked—Toni, apparently, knew a good café nearby—James wondered why she was doing this. Was she lonely?
Given her attitude, it was possible she didn’t have many friends, although he found it hard to believe somehow: there was something undeniably attractive about her that would draw people in like moths to the flame.

The coffee shop was a reasonable size, tucked in a church’s shadow, with comfortable booths for privacy and dim lighting. Soft jazz music played in the background, and James found himself relaxing without thought. As they waited for a server to take their order and then for him to come back with the drinks, they started talking a little. James learned that Toni was an engineer, and that she didn’t have any family, consequence of a technical accident which had forced her to move to New York. She was passionate about her work but didn’t like to talk about herself, especially not about her parents. Given the way she clammed up whenever the subject came up and what she’d told him about her name, James thought he could guess why.

In return, he told her about his siblings and his Ma’s firm handling of the family. “I swear,” he smiled, “sometimes, I feel like she was born to be an officer, and we’re her very own little army.” Toni laughed at that.

“Nothing like the way I grew up, then. I was the ruler, and everyone else my slave. I was a very demanding child,” she winked at him.

The conversation paused when the server came back to set their drinks in front of them. James added a generous amount of cream and sugar to his, absently noting Toni drank hers black. He didn’t know whether to be awed or disgusted.

“So,” Toni closed her eyes as she took a sip of her coffee, shivering slightly as the hot beverage warmed her up from the inside, “how much time do you have left?”

He jerked at the abrupt change in topic, cursed as hot coffee sloshed in his cup and spilled all over his fingers and the tabletop. Unfazed by his language, Toni handed him a bunch of napkins, which he quickly mopped up his ruined drink with. “Are you okay?” she asked, “do you need ice?”

“I’m fine. I was surprised is all.”

She hummed. “So, how long?”

“Two weeks.” He fought to keep the sensation of dread away, but it was useless, and it was only when delicate fingers—surprisingly calloused, he absently noted—slipped under his chin to tip it up, that he realized he’d been glaring at the table.

“Hey,” Toni said gently, “we’ll just have to make the most of them, alright?”

His brain must have turned to mush, because he refused to accept it would have taken it that long to catch on in usual circumstances. “We?” He repeated stupidly.
“Sure,” she grinned, absently petting her hair like she wasn’t used to the shape of it. “It’d be a waste for such a handsome face to get stuck on a permanent frown. You look like you’d be a dashing fella if you smiled.”

James spluttered, hastily slapping a napkin over his mouth when hot liquid started dribbling down his chin. Toni laughed, high and clear, James’ pathetic attempt at a glare only setting her off again when she started to calm down. Heads turned in the café, but she ignored them all. James himself barely paid attention, torn that he was between an increasingly urgent need to breathe and his utter fascination for the creature sitting across from him. Finally, Toni’s fit dimmed back to quiet chuckles, and James could breathe again.

“Oh my God,” Toni croaked at last, “thanks for that, James. It’s been a while since I laughed that hard.”

“Glad to be of service,” he replied drily, much to her amusement.

She grinned. “I think we’re going to be very good friends, Mister James.”

“Too bad I’m leaving so soon. I’d have loved to get to know such a pretty dame more.” The joke fell flat, but Toni didn’t seem too bothered, although the grin faded from her face, replaced by a serious look.

“Are you afraid?”

His first instinct was to deny it. What man would confess to being scared in front of a dame, one they didn’t even know, at that? But, looking at her and her earnest eyes, the shadow haunting her forehead, he thought that maybe, what he needed was indeed an unfamiliar face, someone who would listen but not judge, someone he could very well never see ever again.

“Yes,” he whispered, barely aware of the confession.

She nodded. “There’s nothing wrong with that,” she murmured. “Fear is a human emotion, and it’s very natural. You’re going to war, James, and it won’t be fun. It’ll be dangerous, and you’ll be risking your life, and there’s nothing to be done against it.”

“No, there really isn’t, is there?”

“No.” She smiled sadly, and reached out to cover his hand with her own. “But if you leave defeated, then there’s really no point in fighting, is there? You might as well just lay down and die or step up to the enemy asking to be shot.”

“What would you have me do, then?” he snapped, anger rising at her words. What did she know anyway? She was a dame, there was no way she’d be called to fight, she could just sit here in her comfortable house, and—

“Well, for one, you can go determined to come back home…”
“It’s a war, it’s not exactly as if I control anything…”

“...and then, you can do your damn best to make sure those bastards don’t bring you down, and if they do, then make them pay,” she spoke over him, undeterred by his tone.

“Look at that anger,” Toni chuckled. “Instead of turning it against me, use it against the enemy, and make it the fuel that will keep you alive.”

They fell silent as she drained her coffee and signaled for a refill.

“You’re a very weird dame, you know?” James muttered at last.

“So I’ve been told, in less pleasant terms.” Toni looked utterly unconcerned as she said it, but James wasn’t fooled. It couldn’t have been easy for her, and he wondered if he would ever find out if she’d always been like that. He couldn’t imagine her any other way.

“I’d love to spend the coming weeks with you,” he said after a while, making her raise her head in surprise. “If the offer’s still on the table, of course.”

He tried not to fidget as she watched him closely, but then, she beamed. “It is. Whatever you want to do, soldier. Just name it.”

“Dangerous, that,” he grinned. “I could take advantage.”

She snorted as he fake-leered. “In your dreams, Mister James. In your dreams. Besides, I would think a handsome fellow like you would have no trouble on that side.”

He lifted one shoulder, grinning unrepentantly at her. “Worth a try. You’re not too bad yourself, doll face.”

“Aren’t you a regular Casanova,” she muttered. “So, any wishes?”

“I don’t know, how about the roller coaster? It’s been a while since I last rode one of those. It wasn’t really pleasant either.”

“Yes? How so?”

“My best friend threw up all over me.”

Toni snickered. “Yeah, yeah, laugh at me. I swear it was nowhere near as funny as it sounds.”

“I promise not to throw up on you,” she chortled.

“Thanks.”

They took a walk around the block then back to her apartment (not too far away from his and Stevie’s place, James noticed), making plans along the way. Toni worked during the day and so did James, but they both had the weekend off and could meet up after five o’clock every afternoon. They parted ways after exchanging phone numbers and a promise to meet for, among other things, a day at the Steeplechase Park in Coney Island, rides at the fair and a night at The Elegante.

“Bloody hell, what happened to you? You look like you got punched!”

James groaned, running both hands over his face and wincing as he pressed into the tender skin where Stevie’s latest admirer had introduced him to his fist.
“I did.”

Toni disappeared from sight, then returned with a bunch of ice wrapped in a checkered kitchen towel. Where she had found that, he had no idea, but was grateful for it nonetheless as she gently pressed it to his face.

“What happened?”

“I told Steve about the army. He didn’t really take it well.”

“And he punched you?” She looked shocked, which he somewhat understood, given that the description he’d given of his best friend whenever the topic had come up probably wouldn’t make her think Steve was that kind of guy.

“I wish. No, he snapped his cap, left and picked a fight. I went after him, beat up the other guy, but he got one in. Steve’s still not talking to me.”

Toni shifted on the rickety old chair. He’d been hesitant about letting her into their crappy apartment, she looked like she’d be out of place in such a shabby environment, but she hadn’t reacted at all, except for looking around to take it all in.

“I don’t understand,” Toni confessed after a minute, “why is he angry?”

“That little idiot wants to fight,” James growled, suddenly filled with irrepressible anger. “He thinks it’s his duty to participate in the war effort, to contribute his strength and skills and stand with the other soldiers, never mind that he’s a color-blind asthmatic and barely heavier than a wet dog! Why doesn’t that idiot understand that he’ll be killed as soon as he gets to the battlefield? Why won’t he relent and just accept there’s no way anyone will allow him anywhere near a rifle, never mind an actual fight? He gets his ass kicked all the time because he can’t shut up, so what the hell’s this idiot’s problem?” He was shouting by the end of his tirade, but god, did it feel good. He’d been bottling up his fear, his anger and his nerves ever since he’d got his letter, and the fight with Steve had been the last straw. “Why can’t that idiot understand that by labeling him 4F, they’re saving his life?”

James dropped his head in his hands.

“It’s unfair, isn’t it?” Toni murmured gently from above him. There was no judgement in her voice, only acceptance and understanding, and he leaned into her touch when her fingers started weaving their way through the hair at his nape. He’d had a lot of dames touch him before, not that innocently either, but never like this, never that chastely. Somehow, it made Toni feel even more special. “The one who wants to fight is betrayed by his body, and the one who dreams of peace gets drafted.”

“First time I’m actually jealous of Stevie,” James muttered into his hands. It had always been the other way around, and how horrible was he, that he’d wish upon himself the constant torment his own body subjected Steve to when he’d been blessed with sound mind and body?

“It’s human, James. You’re human. That’s all there is to it.”

“It’s ugly,” he spat.

“Human nature is ugly by definition,” Toni tugged on his hair, then smiled tiredly at him when he looked up. “You’re a good man, James. It’s natural to be afraid of the unknown, especially when it takes such a hideous face.”

He hummed, eyes sliding shut as she kept petting his hair. They had planned to go to Club 802 over
on Flatbush Avenue, but they ended up curling up together on the worn couch and talking instead.

When, at last, it was time for Toni to go, James walked her back to her apartment, and they stood in
the cold, unwilling to part even as the conversation dwindled down and the air filled with the
anticipation of his departure.

He would go the next day. God, it felt like an eternity, and yet so soon at the same time…

“Come with me to the center.”

Toni smiled up at him. He could see her teeth flash in the dim light of the street lighting. It was
strained, he could tell, although her eyes were shadowed, but then she took his hand and squeezed it
gently.

“What time?”

“I—” his throat felt clogged, “I’m supposed to report for duty at 7 am.”

“Let’s meet up here at 6, then, and have breakfast before we go?”

He nodded silently, following her gaze as she glanced up. Light snowflakes were falling from the
sky, a sharp contrast against the inky expanse stretching above their heads.

When he looked back down, she cupped his face between her hands and rose on her tiptoes to brush
her lips against his.

“Goodnight, soldier,” she whispered before retreating inside.

He remained planted on the sidewalk, staring at the door with his fingers on his lips for a good fifteen
minutes before the cold finally made it through the warmth burning hot in his entire body.

“Where were you?” Steve asked when he finally got home. The little guy still wasn’t over James’
enlistment,’ and had been bitching about it for the past two weeks. It was one of the reasons why
James had spent all of his free time with Toni: while she wasn’t his best friend and he barely knew
her, she was fun, smart and witty, and she knew the truth and didn’t judge him for it. She was a
breath of fresh air in an increasingly polluted world.

“But I—” he just said. Steve didn’t know about Toni. He hadn’t mentioned her at first, thinking he
wouldn’t see her again in spite of her promise to give him the best two weeks of his life, but by the
time things had turned out differently and he’d found himself genuinely fond of her, he’d told Steve
about the army and they had barely spoken since. “I’m leaving tomorrow,” he added after a pause.

“Thought you should know.”

He waited, stood in the living room, but Steve didn’t acknowledge him, barely nodding at the
information. His heart sank in his chest. He’d been hoping that maybe, just maybe, Steve would get
over his resentment long enough to say goodbye and accompany him to the bureau. He’d been
hoping to introduce him to Toni at last, but maybe that had been foolish of him, cruel, even. To think
Steve, whose dream it was to join, would go to the bureau and watch him formally enlist was
unrealistic of him.

As he went about his evening routine, James kept listening, hoping to hear Steve speak up, say
something about tomorrow, anything, wish him luck at least. But nothing came, apart from the final
sound of Steve’s door closing for the night, and he thought his heart would break at the sound. In all
their years of friendship, he’d never taken his best friend for the resentful type. Sure, Stevie was
stubborn, kept running his mouth off and picking fights he had no chance of winning, but he was
also smart, loyal and a good friend. Now, though, he was letting his anger blind him to the fact that
his best friend was leaving for war and might never return.

It was too much, James supposed, to hope that Steve would try and look past his disappointment to bid him goodbye.

Toni was as chirpy as ever the next morning, but James could tell at least some of it was forced. He wasn’t in a great mood himself, but found himself laughing at her jokes anyway, watching as her face lit up in response. They didn’t talk about the previous evening, although the atmosphere was charged with the memory of it.

There was a line at the recruitment station. They waited their turn in silence, James gratefully holding onto the hand Toni had slipped into his as they got closer to their destination. Then, finally, came the time for him to register.

“Better come back, Mister James, you promised to take me to Luna Park,” she said, brushing her lips over his once more in a silent promise. James wrapped his arms around her waist and buried his face into the crook of her shoulder, inhaling her scent, trying to memorize the feel of her body against his, her waist under his hands, her silky tresses brushing against his cheek.

“I will. I promise.”

She smiled as she stepped back. “Go get ‘em, soldier.” And with a final, cheeky salute, James Buchanan Barnes left the woman he thought he could come to love with his civilian life and began his military life.

It had never occurred to Antonia Stark that she might one day find herself stuck in the past, especially not in the 1940s, as America was sinking deeper and deeper into the chaos that was World War II. Toni Stark was very smart, a genius and arguably the smartest person in the world, but in all her forty-five years of life (and hadn’t it been a kick to the gut to find herself deaged to twenty-one and stranded in 1941), out of the millions of scenarios she’d come up with for different situations, it had never, ever occurred to her that she might time travel.

Yet, here she was, leaving Mister James (she refused to think of his last name, because that man was another entirely, not the undaunted young man whose clear eyes, heavy with sadness and fear, had first caught her attention) at the recruitment station as he formally enlisted after being drafted, and she hated it. Oh, the past was fine enough—apart from the appalling technology and sexism, that was—but she loathed the conscription process with a passion. James was a genuinely good man. He was good-looking and witty, smart enough to know what war meant in terms of chances of survival, and she’d found herself truly enjoying his company.

In spite of everything, of what had happened, what would happen, what would become of him, of her, of Rogers himself.

You’re an idiot, she scolded herself, not for the first time, and you’ve only got yourself to blame. You could have walked past him. You could have ignored him. Hell, there are thousands of him across the country, so why did you stop? You know who he is!

The Woman Out of Time. Oh, the irony. If only Rogers could see her now. Carefully crossing the street, she walked into a nondescript building, only stopping at the entrance to flash a small,
rectangular card featuring her picture and ID number to the concierge. The man nodded and pressed a button hidden under the counter. Toni stepped into the elevator which had just opened, and allowed herself to be taken up, the rackety contraption reminding her of everything there was at home, in her time, and that this place didn’t have. The loss of JARVIS had scabbed over with time, but there were days, stranded so far away from home it sometimes seemed like a dream, when she missed FRIDAY’s cheerful Irish lilt and cheeky retorts and smooth running of the house with a fierce intensity that threatened to rip her heart apart.

Heads turned as she walked in. She’d been in and out a couple times, but Lovell had been clear in his wishes that she remain as subtle as possible until contact was made, and Bank had approved. Given her circumstances and the mission they were preparing her for, they wanted her existence to be kept as quiet as possible, to prevent any leaks. She couldn’t really fault either of them for it: she’d learned a long time ago that nobody could be trusted.

“Hello there, doll. I’m Levin Goldizen, anything I can do for you?” She stopped short as the man stepped into her path, craning her neck to look at him. The look on his face was nothing short of condescending, and she bristled instantly.

“You can get out of my way, for a start.”

He blinked, obviously surprised. Seated at his desk a mere foot or two away from the pair, Special Operations agent Douglas Chiassino straightened in interest, even as, around him, his colleagues poked their heads out of their cubicles to take a look at the source of the commotion.

“The lawyer cabinet is one floor down, miss,” Towler said, coming up to the dame from behind, and though he at least was slightly more polite, it was clear to Doug that the dame’s annoyance was fast bleeding into full-fledged anger.

“Yes, which is why I’m here at the OSS and not one floor down,” she said, making sure to speak very slowly, as if talking to a particularly obtuse child. “Now if you would be kind enough to step aside, I have an appointment with Bank.”

And with that, she sidestepped the oaf still blocking her path, only for him to grab her arm before she could get away. Her entire body froze up. Doug stood in alarm. “Wait a second…”

The woman closed her eyes and let out a breath, before looking at him over her shoulder, a frankly eerie smile plastered to her face. Goldizen recoiled slightly, but didn’t let go. “What now?”

“You can’t possibly be implying that you’re part of the OSS.”

The atmosphere cooled several degrees. “No? And why not?”
Goldizen snorted, eyes roving over her form. People were snickering around them. Toni, on the other hand, was now gritting her teeth to refrain from lashing out as anger blazed its way through her body. Low profile, Bank had said, you need to remain as discreet as possible until you’re in so as to minimize the risk that there’ll be a leak. That meant not showcasing her skills. But as Levin Goldizen started explaining just why she wasn’t suited to being a spy—mainly, because she was too pretty, didn’t have the right anatomical parts and should just go home or better yet, find herself a man to wash socks for, she found that…

One second, Goldizen was snickering at the pretty doll with his office buddies, the next, pain was blossoming through his face as she landed an impeccable punch right to his eye, twisted out of his grip and rode him to the ground, muscled thighs squeezing the air out of his lungs and throat.

“Remember this moment, you chauvinistic pig,” she snarled, absently tucking a dark strand of hair behind her ear, “it’s probably the last time you’ll ever have your head between a woman’s legs.”

Doug chortled despite his horror at her crass language, loud and clear in the sudden silence, as the agents stared at the delicate woman standing tall and proud in their midst, the form fitting emerald winter coat she was wearing hugging her waist and showing just how thin and small she really was. She hadn’t even displaced the matching beret perched on her dark curls. With her blazing hazel eyes and long lashes, she made for a stunning sight.
Before anyone could speak up, however, Colonel Aaron Bank strode out of the elevator, glanced at the scene, and then turned to Toni.

“I thought I told you to keep a low profile, Agent Galante?”

She shrugged. “Your man was being rude, and I have a short temper.”

“You’re supposed to have a lid on it.”

“I do. I just have no patience for idiots, and this one was pushing it.”

The colonel ran a hand over his face, looking like he had aged ten years, and strangely resigned, as if he knew it was pointless to argue with her.

“Someone help this moron up. Galante, my office.”
Nodding curtly, she turned on her heels and strode right over to the colonel’s office, only pausing to wink at a grinning Doug as she went.

“Didn’t your mother teach you to respect your betters, Goldizen?” Bank snapped as he walked past the agent. The man glared at his back, but said nothing. Talking back would only land him in trouble, and the colonel obviously sided with the woman. The door had barely closed behind the pair that his colleagues rushed forward to help him.

“Holy shit, Goldizen, you alright?”

Galante was seated in a comfortable armchair across from his desk when he walked in, legs crossed at the knee as she waited for him in a rare demonstration of patience. Bank had learned, over their months working together, that the woman had a fiery temper, but would rather use her wit to get back at her enemies than resort to her extensive knowledge of martial arts. Where and when she’d learned, he wasn’t exactly sure, but he knew for a fact that she was deadly, both in mind and body.

“Well,” he grumbled as he sat down and grabbed a tumbler of brandy, “at least you know how to make an impression.” He poured two glasses, slid one towards her. It still shocked him a little to see such a delicate-looking dame drink like a man, but he’d come to accept, over the past few months, that this woman was one of a kind and, as she said, from another time.

She shrugged, taking a sip. “I live to serve.”

Bank nodded tiredly and wondered, not for the first time, if it had been wise to send her on this mission. They’d never heard of HYDRA before, hardly knew anything about it, which made it incredibly difficult to come up with a suitable plan for infiltration that wouldn’t include the agent approaching them as a prisoner or being quickly compromised. Too little information made the risks of slip-up far too important to risk a man on such an operation, but HYDRA was growing in power, and they desperately needed to put a stop to their actions.

Galante had been a godsend. Bank had been crossing the lobby when he’d heard a commotion, and had been stopped cold by the sight of the seemingly frail woman knocking out men twice her size without breaking a sweat when they tried to drag her out. By the time the reinforcements called by the hysterical concierge had slammed their way into the lobby, Bank was already leaving with the mysterious woman at his side. Two hours later, Antonia ‘Toni’ Galante was an official agent of the Office of Strategic Services, with the grade of captain and a high profile mission coming up, and Bank couldn’t believe his luck.

Lovell, although skeptical at first, had eventually relented when it became obvious that the woman, for all of her strange past, was very good at a lot of things, fluent in German, French and Italian, an engineer on par with Howard Stark, if not even better, and with extensive training in what she called Mixed Martial Arts. All in all, a lethal weapon wrapped in a nice, innocent-looking package.

They’d been laying the foundations of that mission for months, preparing her for different scenarios, dropping hints here and there that would bring her to HYDRA’s attention, ensuring they would want
to recruit her. And they had, convinced that they had found themselves the perfect mole. Still, for all that she was competent and dangerous, he didn’t like the idea of sending her behind enemy lines like that.

“Are you sure you want to do this? We can still withdraw.”

She nodded decisively, setting her empty glass on the desk, along with an envelope. “Too late for that. I’m in already. What do you have for me?”

Knowing the steel in her eyes for what it was, he withdrew a thick folder from a drawer and slid it over to her. “HYDRA has been capturing our men instead of killing them outright for some time now. I want to know what this is about. Help them if you can, but only if you’re absolutely certain it won’t endanger your cover. Otherwise, do whatever you need to do to keep your position.”

She knew what it meant, Bank could see it in her face, the haunted shadow hovering at the back of her eyes, the tired slump to her shoulders. Leaning forward, she poured herself another glass of brandy and downed it in one go.

“I’ll do what’s needed,” she promised, but he knew her enough by now to understand that she wasn’t the type to follow orders over what she believed to be right. Grabbing the folder, Toni started flipping through it, taking in the Italian, French, German and American sets of IDs, the final set of instructions, travel arrangements and the resource sheet. She quickly memorized the bank account numbers, then jolted at the mention of—

“A handler? Why now?” she frowned.

“Your mission’s only going to get more dangerous from now on. You’ll need a contact, someone reliable. Doug Chiassino’s one of my best agents, and also probably the most sensible. He won’t give you any trouble because you’re a dame.”

“I don’t need a handler.”

“Probably not,” he agreed, “but he’ll be there in case you need anything, be it extraction, supplies, or just someone to talk to. He’ll also get your mail for you.”

She froze at that, eyes going wide. “Problem?”

“No, I—no.”

“If you’re sure. I would also like you to take some time to teach some fighting to the recruits, and maybe the full-fledged agents, too.”
Toni raised her eyebrows. “And you think they’ll actually listen? I’m just a woman.”

The colonel snorted at that, reclining in his chair, an amused smile playing on his lips. “Given the way you put Goldizen in his place, I don’t that’s going to be a problem. Besides, you don’t strike me as the type to take things lying down.”

“Damn right I’m not,” Toni deadpanned. “It will depend on my status with HYDRA, though.”

“Yes, of course,” Bank readily acquiesced. “But if you can drop by once or twice a week for a training session on top of your work here, that would be fantastic.”

“I’ll see what I can do after my meeting with their representative, then.”

“Still no news on that front?”

Toni shrugged. “It would be stupid of them to tell me in advance where they’ll be and when.”

“You can’t blame me for hoping they’ll make our lives easier.”

“If they did, you’d be out of a job.”

“Must you always have the last word?” Bank feigned annoyance. Toni grinned.

“You’d be bored.”

The colonel sighed, rubbing his forehead. “Right. Okay, I’ll introduce you to your handler now, he’s been briefed already, so you can get to know each other a little before you ship out.”

Towler was pressing ice to Goldizen’s eye when they walked out, but it was already turning a nice shade of black, much to Toni’s satisfaction. They walked toward the elevator, stopping by Chiassino’s desk. The man—dark blonde hair neatly parted on the left, handsome enough, black eyes and a pleasant smile—unfolded an impressive 6’2” frame from his chair, and she instantly noticed the way he favored his right side.

“Doug Chiassino, meet Toni Galante. You’ll be her handler from now on.”

“Good morning, miss,” Doug said, extending his hand, “it’s nice to meet you at last. Your file’s impressive to say the least.”

Toni shook his hand, nodding. “Here’s to your upcoming headache,” she smirked, lifting an imaginary glass. “I’ve been told I can be difficult.”

“Understatement of the century,” Bank muttered under his breath, only to be ignored. “I’ll see you when I see you, then. Don’t get killed.” He clapped her on the shoulder, nodded at Chiassino, and retreated back to his office. Doug watched him go with raised eyebrows, then turned back to his charge.
“That was suspiciously nice of him.”

Toni snorted. “I don’t die easy.”

“Given the kind of mission you’re on, I’m glad to hear that,” Doug smiled at her, then tilted his head at the door. “Let’s take this outside, yeah?”

She was already walking. “Sure.” Doug hurriedly jammed his hat on his head, grabbed his coat and scarf, and hobbled after her into the elevator. She was, as he quickly found out, utterly unafraid, cool as a cucumber as they went over the details of the mission. It was like being surrounded by psychopaths was of no consequence at all to her, and he found himself wondering at her absolute disregard for her own safety.

Boot camp was no pleasure cruise, but James found that he quickly adapted to it as he displayed a talent for marksmanship. As a sniper, he was the best, and he got promoted to sergeant before the end of his training, much to his astonishment and, if he was honest, pride.

Only on the evening of the first day, when he was lying sore and battered on his cot, did he realize he hadn’t asked Antonia her last name and the letter he’d been composing in his head would have to remain unsent. He wrote it anyway, followed by another, shorter one for Steve. Although he wished to be open with him like he used to be, James felt that something had fractured between them in those two weeks since his draft notice had arrived, and there was no way he could talk to his best friend about everything he’d told Antonia. Steve’s reply was half-disgruntled and half-excited, begging to know more about everything, from daily life to training to the officers and how they were treated.

“Barnes! Colonel’s office, yesterday!”

Sighing inwardly, James jumped to his feet with a swift “Aye, sir!” and left the barracks with a glance at the letter he’d been about to start. The old man was sitting at his desk, and barely glanced up as James came in and saluted.

“I got your assignment orders, Barnes,” he announced at last as he picked up a brown envelope. “107th Infantry. You’ll ship off to England in ten days. That’s a week off, you’re a lucky man.”

James’ heart started pounding in his chest. He’d never expected to go home before seeing the frontline, but he would take the opportunity with all the gratitude he could muster. It was an opportunity to talk to Steve, try to salvage their friendship, and to see Antonia again, ask for her name so he could write her.

“Thank you, sir.”

Grabbing the papers, James saluted and left, almost running back to his barracks in his haste to read. And there it was indeed, right under his name.

107th Infantry.

Joseph Rogers had been part of that one, too.

James didn’t know whether Steve would be happy or furious to hear the news. His letter was still lying facedown on the bed, where he’d left it after reading it. Folding Steve’s letter back into its wrinkled, stained envelope, James grabbed his paper pad, lay down on his belly, and started chewing on the end of the pen as he tried to decide what to say.
Dear Antonia, he finally wrote,

Steve replied to me. I admit I don’t really know if I should have expected it or feel terrible that I didn’t. He was so angry when I left that I thought he would never talk to me again. I suppose I underestimated our friendship, or his character. What does it say about me, that I keep underestimating him even after so long?

On to happier news, I was given my assignment at last. I shall keep it to myself until we meet: I got the unexpected, but very welcome surprise of one week’s leave before shipping to England. Since you will never read this letter, I intend to surprise you with my arrival—given, of course, that you remember me and still want to see me. It has been a long time without any contact, after all, and we only knew each other for two weeks, during which I wasn’t even at my best. I promise to do better this time around.

I will see you soon, I hope,

James Buchanan Barnes

“Behavior report again, Barnes?”

James jumped, cursing as he hit his head on the bedframe. His bunkmate guffawed as James flipped him off. “Damn right. You jealous?”

“Not really. They’re just another form of legal slavery, you’ll see that soon enough.”

James scoffed. “Right.”

He liked Mallow well enough, but something about the man’s obvious disregard for dames annoyed him to no end, especially when he ended up being indirectly disrespectful to Antonia. Of course, she would probably kick his ass if she ever heard he thought she needed to be protected in any way, shape or form—he knew her well enough to tell she was a very independent lady, but that didn’t make it any less true. Antonia was special, and James hated to hear her dissed.

Setting down his pen, James read the letter over, then carefully folded it and placed it atop a short stack of letters, all neatly labeled Miss Antonia. He chuckled as he thought of her reaction if she saw it. She’d told him several times to call her Toni, not Antonia, but there was a form of poetry with her full name that he couldn’t help but love. Besides, Toni sounded too much like Tony, and he didn’t want to have problems if someone ever came across those letters and got the wrong idea.

As he lay in bed that night, James smiled. Only a few days left, and then he’d be back home. Even though it might be the very last time he ever saw Brooklyn, Steve or Antonia again, he couldn’t help the excitement coursing through his veins.

“Miss Galante.”

Toni looked away from the window. Beige overcoat open on a nondescript suit, hat in hand, short black hair, and long, aquiline nose, he was utterly unremarkable.

“Mister Kruger.”

Toni studied him. She knew him to be German, although there no trace of an accent when he spoke. His English, like his camouflage skills, was perfect. Toni tilted her head at the seat across from her, watching silently as Kruger smoothly slid into the booth. The man moved like a trained operative, fast and quiet, black eyes darting from side to side as he took in his surroundings.
“You look ravishing.”

Toni raised her eyebrows. “Flattery will lead you nowhere, but the sentiment is appreciated nonetheless. I have information which you’ll probably like, as an introductory present of sorts. More will come...for the right price.”

Kruger grabbed the envelope she was sliding on the table, and slid it inside his coat pocket. “Someone of your caliber will climb ranks very quickly, Fräulein Galante.”

“Good. That’s the reason I’m here.”

“We won’t disappoint you,” Kruger said with a thin smile, “Herr Schmidt was extremely impressed by your skills. It’s not every day you come across strong women like yourself.”

She shrugged nonchalantly. “Women will rule one day, you’ll see.”

“Well they’re off to a very good start with you on their side, Fräulein Galante. We will contact you.”

And just like that, he was gone. Toni waited a while, just to be sure he was gone, then slumped in her seat with a sigh. Kruger gave her the creeps. The man was cold as ice, and twice as strong. He didn’t care about collateral damage, and there was enough in his file about his previous contracts as an assassin for her to be terrified he’d see through her every single time they met up. So far, it hadn’t happened, but she knew better than to let her guard down.

She signaled for more coffee, gulped it down all at once, reveling in the pain of her burnt tongue. She wasn’t a spy, never had been. Sure, she’d been trained in mixed martial arts by the best teachers as soon as she’d been old enough to understand that life was far from sunshine and rainbows, especially for a girl, even more so the daughter of a genius billionaire who couldn’t give a damn what happened to her. Being a weapons designer also ensured she knew how to use them—her skill at marksmanship, like her ability at MMA, had never made it to her SHIELD file, she’d made sure of that, but that didn’t make her any less dangerous.

Take that away, what are you? Rogers had said on the helicarrier. How she’d longed to punch his teeth in and make him swallow his words until he begged. But she couldn’t. She knew if she did, there would be questions she didn’t want to answer, and it was always better to have people underestimate you than the other way around. They thought she was nothing without her suit and tech, thought she was defenseless if only they blasted her with an EMP, but they had no idea of her true power, and that’s the way she wanted it.

She didn’t trust Fury, SHIELD, or the Avengers, not a single one of them. They’d all paraded around in her tech, made use of her money and smarts, taken her upgrades and gifts, all without a single word of gratitude.

Toni was tired of being taken for granted, of people only expecting something from her whenever they approached her.

James hadn’t been like that. He didn’t know who she was, her past, and what she used to have at her disposal. He didn’t know that she was a genius of unparalleled IQ, didn’t know that she could design the most incredible weapons, had no idea how filthy rich she had been. Although, here, she was nowhere near as influential as she had been in her own time, she had managed to build a nice life for herself. The army had been nowhere near her thoughts at first, but then, she’d realized she might as well put her skills to use, and take advantage of this unexpected opportunity to be herself and not billionaire Toni Stark for once in her life.
She could just be Antonia, who cared and would fight for a greater cause, who would talk to a stranger on the street because they looked like their entire world was crumbling around them.

He’d only taken what she’d freely offered, never once crossing the line, and she thought she was good enough at reading people to be certain that, had she expressed the desire to never see him again, he’d have backed off and vanished from her life. Where are you, Mister James? she questioned silently, watching passersby hurry down the sidewalk. It was snowing again. She wondered if it was snowing where he was, and regretted not having asked for his name, or offered hers so they could keep in contact.

Holy Shit. Howard would flip if he could hear her now. When had she become so needy?

A grunt tore her from her thoughts. She wavered, looking around for the origin, but there was nothing out of place on the street. Then, she heard it again, followed by a clatter and the muted sound of fists hitting flesh. Cursing quietly, she hurried over to the next alley, the entrance to which she could see peeking a short distance ahead, and paused only for a second, but it was enough.

“Hey!” she called.

The beefy man who’d been in the process of beating up a guy so skinny he would probably break at the first gust of wind, turned towards her. “Well, well, what do we have here?”

“Back the fuck off and leave this guy alone. I think he got the message.” He was sprawled unmoving on the ground. She winced as she imagined the damage the bully must have dealt.

“What if I refuse? Will you pay me?” He leered. Toni shuddered violently.

“Sure. I’ll give you the nastiest beating you’ve ever had.”

The guy scoffed, walking closer in what she supposed he thought to be a charming swagger and actually looked like a fat duck hobbling around. “Pretty thing like you? More suited for tango, if you know what I mean.” He lifted his hand as if to run it down her face, only to scream in pain as she grabbed the offending limb and twisted it sharply to the side, waiting for him to curl in and step forward to lock his arm behind his back and tug down. The man fell on his knees, still shouting, his face twisted in agony.

“It’s easy,” Toni said conversationally, “to beat up people smaller than you. But there comes a time when the smaller guy becomes stronger, and then where does that leave you?” Releasing him, she took two steps back, placing herself between the two men. “Scram.”

She turned even as he scrambled away, only to come face to face with Steve Rogers.

He was scrawny, shorter than she was and his hair looked nothing like the spiky mess she’d come to know in her time, but it was Rogers all right, glaring up at her in an all too familiar way and yet slightly more respectful, as if he weren’t sure his manners allowed him to be anything less than perfectly courteous to a dame.

Even one who cursed and fought like a man.

Yet, there was obvious resentment in his eyes as he climbed to his feet, and the sharp tang of humiliation. Right. Seemed like, even before he got the serum, Rogers had been a stubborn asshole, and just as bigoted as the rest of them. Maybe, she thought, maybe that was why he despised her so much back in 2015. Maybe he just couldn’t stomach the thought of a dame being as crass and vulgar and unladylike as she was. Yet, there was a sort of twisted beauty in seeing him beaten and bloody,
and cruel satisfaction curled in her gut at the sight of the blood running down his chin. She remembered those same lips split in a Siberian bunker, remembered those very baby blues glaring down at her the same way they’d glared at the bully’s retreating back.

*I could do this all day.* She’d thought they were friends, and how delusional she must have been, that he volleyed that dratted sentence at her like she was one of those who’d used to pick on him as a kid? She could never hope to measure up to him, in her time, not as a child, with Howard, and not as an adult. The man himself had found her lacking when it had turned out he wasn’t as dead as the world thought, and seeing him now, shorter than her, thin and beaten bloody…she wasn’t a good person, had had enough people tell her of her own shortcomings over and over again to know that much, but that dark thought hovering viciously at the back of her mind chilled her to the bone.

*How does it feel, Rogers? To be beaten to a pulp by someone stronger than you?*

She wasn’t the little guy, far from it. She knew how to take care of herself, had spent her entire life fighting one war or another, and the Accords hadn’t been any different. Yet, in-between getting the serum and joining the Avengers, she thought Rogers had maybe forgotten what it meant to be truly powerless. He was still prideful, though. And while the arrogance he’d displayed during the Civil War mess wasn’t there yet, she could see the stirring potential for it, lurking at the edges of the eyes he kept stubbornly turned away from her. There would be no thanks.

Well, she’d done her civic duty. Nodding once, she turned on her heels and left him to gather the tatters of his pride, since apparently she still wasn’t worth saving his skinny hide.

Too bad for him.

She’s only gone a few feet before she heard hurried footsteps behind her. “Wait!”

“What now?” she snapped, turning around.

He doubled over as he caught up to her, hands on his knees as he tried to regulate his breathing, and she thought she remembered reading something about him being an asthmatic in his file.

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, looking genuinely contrite, “but you didn’t need to interfere. I was handling it.”

She scoffed. He was so deluded, it made her want to hit him, except even Toni Stark had never stooped so low as to attack someone weaker than her. On the contrary, she took a twisted pleasure out of reducing bigger and more dangerous people to blubbering messes, which, now that she thought about it, might be why she couldn’t stand the captain in the future. The man, for all of his anti-bully spiel, struck her as the biggest bully of all, and if there was one thing she couldn’t stand, it was hypocrisy.

“I didn’t know licking concrete meant being in control of a fight, but I suppose a weak woman such as myself wouldn’t know anything about that. Next time, I’ll just let you eat the dust.” He opened his mouth, eyes darkening with rage, but she didn’t wait for his retort and walked away, seething quietly at his abject arrogance. Unfortunately, it looked like he wasn’t quite done with her and, just like he did in the future when he was pissed at her for some reason or another and hunted her down to yell at her, he kept following her like a stubborn puppy.

“That’s not what I meant! I…”

“Look, darling, I don’t care. You can go ahead and get your face broken because you’re too proud to get help, it’s not my problem. Now leave me alone.”
This time, he didn’t follow, and she heaved a sigh of relief. Soon, her apartment building was in sight, and she couldn’t get in fast enough. Dropping her coat and scarf to the floor, she almost tore the beret off her head and bee-lined to the kitchen to brew some tea. Her head was pounding with a headache, and she wished she had some aspirin.

It was ironic, really, that Rogers managed to give her migraines every time she saw him. Usually, though, it took a little longer to set in. Like ten minutes of nagging. She didn’t need to listen to his lectures to know he was better than her. She’d known that since the age of three, when she’d started to understand the sub-context of Howard’s drunk tirades. A daughter, when he’d wished for a son. Inner strength, wit and brains instead of stubborn righteousness and thirst for justice in a flawless body.

Short and willowy instead of strong like an oak. Toni bent to weather the storm. Rogers stood strong and unbending and the elements broke against him. Howard never realized that the important thing wasn’t the way she did it, but that in the end, she never broke. Then again, he probably never paid her enough attention to notice.

She sank onto the couch and threw an arm over her eyes in the hopes of blocking out the light, feeling around for a cushion and the old blanket she kept on the sofa. Dragging the former under her head and the latter over herself, she tried to concentrate on her breathing and only her breathing, letting it lull her into sleep, praying some rest would be enough to rid her of the throbbing in her temples.

It wasn’t. When she woke up the next day, the migraine was still there, as powerful as ever. Thankfully, it was a weekend so she didn’t have to go to work, Toni resigned herself to finding the closest pharmacy to get some aspirin, knowing that if the headache hadn’t gone by now, then it would only get worse and cripple her for days of she let it be.

Cursing at herself for leaving her coat and hat on the floor where she had to bend over to grab them—it felt like all the blood in her body flowed down to her brain in those few seconds, dramatically increasing the pain she was in, she slowly made her way out, sunglasses glued to her face in a poor attempt to protect her eyes.

The weather was chilly but sunny, and she squinted her eyes as she walked to the pharmacy, each step sending a sharp spike of pain lancing through her skull. At the pharmacy, she barely managed to ask for the aspirin without throwing up, and, as soon as she’d paid for it, she dry-swallowed two pills without paying attention to the people glancing at her in concern. She stood by the entrance for a few minutes, trying to muster the energy to take the trip back, only to slam into the wall when someone ran into her.

She moaned in pain, squeezing her eyes shut as the jolt upset her head even more, slapped a hand over her mouth as the nausea reared up with a vengeance.

“Miss? Miss, are you alright?”

_Do I look like I’m alright?_ she opened her mouth to yell, only to jerk to the side and vomit all over the sidewalk. _There goes the aspirin_, she thought mournfully as she slumped against the wall, tired to the bone. It felt like what little energy had remained in her body had been drained by vomiting.

“Miss!” There were hands on her shoulders, her arms. “I’ll call an ambulance.”

That brought her back to attention. There weren’t any records of her in this time except for those provided by the OSS, and she certainly didn’t have enough money to pay for professional treatment. “No hospital,” she rasped, grabbing blindly at the hand holding her. “I’m fine.”
She straightened to prove it, steeling herself to step away from the wall. Toni counted it as a success when she only swayed instead of outright collapsing, so she took a step, and then another, the aspirin box tightly clutched in her palm. Five steps later, she stumbled, and would have fallen if not for the man’s hands steadying her at the last moment.

“At least let me call someone,” he pleaded in a somewhat familiar voice, but she was too dazed to ponder over it. Not Mister James, though. Mister James was—

“No one...to call. War…” Mister James was gone, off to war.

“Then I’ll take you home. You can’t be alone in this condition, miss. I live right next door. C’mon.”

He was already tugging her the other way, leading carefully. “Don’t need help,” she mumbled. “Can handle it on my own.”

The man scoffed. “Now look who’s talking.” She wondered what he meant by that, but there were more pressing matters to deal with, like the fact that a stranger was taking her to his apartment when she was too weak to protest, possibly to rape, torture or kill her, or the fact that her nausea was back and…

Again, she lurched to the side and emptied the contents of her stomach on the pavement, dry-heaving when there was nothing left to vomit. A gentle hand wiped at her mouth with a handkerchief, and then they were off again, up a set of mercifully dark stairs, then into a quiet living room.

“Wait a minute,” the man murmured, then darted off. The blinds slid shut one by one, and then the room was dark except for a few slivers of light slithering through the cracks, but it was much better than it had been a second ago. She could feel him hovering nervously as she took off her coat and beret, then he guided her somewhere, and helped her settle down on a bed, saying something about a flatmate who’d enlisted and wouldn’t be back before tomorrow at the earliest, so she could use his room for the time being, but she could only swallow the pills he handed her before sinking back onto the bed, the pillow a welcome reprieve for her burdened neck, and then, there was only the steady rhythm of her breathing and the quieting beats of her heart.

She didn’t even hear him leave.

Steve left the door ajar just in case she needed something, and padded into the small living room, wondering at coincidences. What were the chances that he’d run into the dame who had saved him only the day before, and that he’d get a chance to repay her for it? He’d been awkward and rude to her, he’d realized that after she’d left, and he’d regretted it, but he’d had no way to apologize to her. She seemed like a swell dame, if slightly weird.

Yet now here she was, lying in Bucky’s bed, barely coherent enough to string two words together. He wasn’t sure what ailed her, but she wasn’t feverish, so he’d obliged her wishes not to go to the hospital. Hospitals were expensive, especially during those times of war, and he wouldn’t force her to receive treatment she couldn’t afford.

He’d just have to catch Bucky before he barged in, and explain the situation. Surely, his friend wouldn’t protest him helping a pretty dame. In fact, he would probably tease him mercilessly about it.

Steve paused. He’d have to apologize to Bucky, too. It wasn’t his fault that Steve was born sick and small, and no one understood the desire to fight for one’s country more than Steve did. It had been unfair of him to hold his best friend’s enlistment against him. More than that, it wasn’t worth hurting their friendship over. Bucky had stuck by his side ever since kindergarten, through good and bad,
had defended him against countless bullies, and had supported him during his mother’s long agony and after her death. Bucky had been there through long nights of wheezing and fighting for breath. Steve would probably be dead were it not for him.

Steve glanced at the open door to his friend’s room. He didn’t feel comfortable retreating into his room. He might not hear the dame if she was in distress. Instead, he settled down on the worn couch with his sketchpad and pencils, and started drawing.

Steve jerked awake, uncertain as to what had woken him up. It was dark outside, the streetlights casting a dim glow to the night. Straightening up, he grimaced at the crick in his neck. He’d fallen asleep on the couch, and while his sketchpad was still precariously perched on his knees, his pencils were scattered all over the floor. He sighed. No doubt he’d have to crawl under the couch to gather those which had inevitably rolled under it.

A noise from Bucky’s room had him on his feet in an instant. Pushing open the door, he froze at the sight.

The dame was tangled in the blankets, struggling blindly, sweat mixing with tears as she moaned softly. For a second, he thought she was awake, but her eyelids were firmly shut, and her eyes were rolling wildly under their protective cover, so he hurried forward, almost tripping over his feet in the process.

“Miss,” he called, as gently as he could, “miss wake up. It’s just a nightmare, you need to wake up.”

Her eyes snapped open as he shook her shoulder, hands flying to her chest protectively. Steve frowned, watching the way she looked every way but his, eyes darting this way and that. She looked like a caged animal, ready to flee at the first sign of danger. “Are you okay, miss?”

Glazed over eyes darted from side before settling on his face, and Steve almost flinched at the sharp focus, only to jerk back in shock when she screamed in abject terror. “Get away from me! FRIDAY, status, what do we have left? FRIDAY!” She was spiraling out of control, her breathing quick and shallow, wheezing gasps and nothing more, one hand curled protectively over her chest as the other came up to protect her head.

“Miss, you don’t need to be afraid, I’m not going to hurt you. I’m Steve Rogers, you helped me, remember? You’re at my apartment. You were sick—”

But she wasn’t listening—was she even hearing him? He grabbed her shoulders when she made to sit up. Her scream was blood-curling. It felt like all the hair on his body stood upright at the sound, but he didn’t have time to acknowledge it over the deafening crunch of her head lurching up straight into his nose, even as a closed fist slammed into his knee. His nose exploded in agony, and he cried out as his knee folded out under him, and he crumpled to the ground. With a muted snarl of “Don’t touch me, Rogers!” she darted out of the room with the blind desperation of a hunted animal, navigating the darkness with surprising ease even in her panic. Shaking his head to clear it, Steve pushed himself off the floor and gave chase, but she was out already, thundering down the narrow staircase and completely ignoring his frantic calls for her to come back.

The neighbors banged against the walls, a few heads peering over the railing and down the stairwell to locate the source of the commotion, but all Steve could focus on was the way the moonlight shone bright and cold on disheveled black curls, highlighting a slender body for a fraction of a second, before she disappeared.
Cursing, he grabbed his coat and followed, but the street was empty by the time he made outside, and the falling snow was still too light for her to have left a trail. He tried anyway, wouldn’t let it be said that he’d left a delirious, sick dame wander around by herself, but she was gone, silent and ethereal as a gust of wind as the snowfall turned into a blizzard and, finally, that familiar zipper in his chest chased him back home.

Steve was deep in what Bucky liked to call his “artist trance” when the familiar jingle of keys in the staircase, followed by the lock clicking open, had his head jerk up.

“I’m back!”

“Bucky!”

Bucky grunted as Steve barreled into him, but returned the hug full force. “Holy shit, Stevie, did you —what the hell happened to your face?” Gentle hands cupped Steve’s face, turning it this way and that. The young man let his friend fuss over him, well aware that there was nothing to be done when Bucky entered mother-hen mode, and took the opportunity to study his heart brother instead. The ice blue eyes narrowed on the black blossom on his nose were familiar, as light and piercing as ever, but there were new calluses on the fingers absently stroking his jaw, and there was something new to Bucky’s posture he couldn’t exactly pinpoint but that made him seem bigger, somehow.

Older.

And he realized that Bucky was leaving soon, that he was going to the frontline where Steve himself dreamed of being, and that, already, he was changing…and it was irrational, he knew Bucky wouldn’t abandon him, not willingly, but there was this insistent feeling that he was being left behind, that Bucky was turning into someone he didn’t know, someone better and different.

Which was ridiculous, right? Bucky had only been to boot camp for a few weeks, it wasn’t like he’d spent years fighting the Germans in Europe. Steve forced himself to smile and step away. “I missed you. How was boot camp?”

Bucky shrugged, setting his duffle bag down. “Okay, I suppose. There was a terrifying lack of dames.”

Steve snorted. “Right. Speaking of dames, I had one sleep in your room last night, I hope you don’t mind.”

Bucky froze on the spot, then turned to take an exaggerated look at his friend. “A dame, Stevie? Details, I want details!”

“Nothing to say. She was sick, so I took her home and put her in your room to sleep it off. Then she—left.” He thought it better not to mention how exactly she’d left, and let Bucky draw his own conclusions about his bruised nose.

“Aw, c’mon, Stevie! Don’t tell me that’s it!”

“It is,” Steve said, making a show of raising his eyebrows. “And like I told you, she’s gone.”

“Did you at least catch her name? No doubt she’d like to thank her dashing rescuer.”

Steve huffed. “Nope.”

“Oh god,” Bucky groaned, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I can’t believe this. You know what, I
don’t care. I’m going to take a shower, then a nap, and then we’ll talk about it.”

“Sure. I got some work to get done anyway. I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Bucky smiled, drawing him into a hug once more. “It’s good to see you again, buddy.”

“You too.”

It was only a few minutes after Bucky had disappeared into his room that he poked his head out again. “Your dame forgot her pills, Stevie,” he announced, lobbing the metallic box at his friend. Steve caught it, a familiar weight in his hands.

“She’s not my dame.”

“So I suppose we have no way to give it back to her?”

Steve shrugged. “She’s the one who left without a word. Either she’ll find her way back or she won’t. Nothing we can do about it either way.”

“Geesh,” Bucky smirked, “you sound like a scorned lover, Stevie.” He stayed a few more seconds to thoroughly enjoy the nice shade of red crawling from his friend’s ears and neck to his face, then ducked back into his room with a peal of laughter. It seemed like Stevie hadn’t been inactive while he was gone. “Good for you!” He tossed over his shoulder, snickering at Steve’s muffled protest.

“Again!” Toni barked.

The trainees grumbled but started over. Toni rubbed her forehead tiredly. When Bank had welcomed her into the agency, she’d never in a million years imagined he’d also pick her to train the new recruits. Then again, she was trained in martial arts and smarter than any of them combined, so she supposed she really was a good choice. The thing was, while she’d taught a couple classes at MIT before, she’d never had the opportunity to teach anyone MMA, as she was far too busy solidifying her reputation as a narcissistic bitch who was completely useless outside of her smarts and suits.

Of course, the men—long-times soldiers, black ops, or former FBI operatives—had laughed long and loud when she’d introduced herself as the instructor. The jeers had been unfortunately familiar, but she’d ignored them, simply taking off her coat to reveal a pair of military fatigues tucked into heavy black combat boots, and a bottle green long-sleeved shirt. The jeers had turned to catcalls.

Toni had called the loudest recruit up front, and told him to hit her with everything he had. Of course, the moron had held back. She’d been quick to rid him of that particular hang-up when she’d slammed her knee into his gut before bringing him down in a single move.

The catcalls had turned to dead silence.

Three hours later, they were diligently practicing basic katas, the few who had thought to play badass and stand up to her having swiftly and painfully been put in their place. Toni, however, was bored to death, and very glad that the session was coming to an end. The door opening behind her was a welcome distraction, and she raised an eyebrow as Doug Chiassino hobbled over to her.

“Hard at work, I see, Agent Galante,” he greeted with a smile. She shrugged, nodded.

“What can I do for you?”

“I thought I’d check on you, see how you’re doing. And what’s new, too.”
“Nothing much. I’m waiting for instructions,” she informed him, careful to keep her tone neutral so none of the recruits would glean anything from the conversation.

“I see. Would you care for a cup of coffee once you’re done?” Doug smiled as Toni visibly perked up, eyes brightening at the perspective of the scalding nectar.

“God, yes. Let me just wrap this up.”

Doug watched as she started barking orders, grinning at the way she ruled the previously undisciplined recruits with an iron fist. Seeing those wannabe agents running around like headless chickens and following this petite woman’s sharp instructions to the letter was hilarious, and yet, he knew first hand that under this pretty face and delicate frame was a lethal fighter and a powerful thinker. Sure, she’d never shown the full extent of her capabilities, but he’d seen and heard enough to suspect that this woman was smart beyond comparison. Judging by Goldizen’s introduction to the floor the day Bank had met with her, there was no doubt she was trained, but Doug just didn’t know to what extent. And he wondered, when he saw her, how and why such a beautiful woman had come to turn herself into a deadly weapon.

Coffee with Chiassino was quiet and entertaining. The man had a dry sense of humor that appealed to her inner sarcastic bitch, and while he was obviously curious about her past, he didn’t ask any questions, which made him alright in her book. Of course, there were always chances he had his own agenda, but she was an unknown in this time, with no fortune or genius inventions for people to steal, so she wasn’t too worried. She hadn’t really known what to expect when he’d first offered to go get coffee, but it had become a weekly habit after a while, and she didn’t regret it. Today was no different, until Doug breached a new subject altogether, one she hadn’t seen coming.

“So, anyone in your life?”

Toni spluttered, almost inhaling her coffee through her nose. Doug snickered. “I—what...What the hell?”

“Is that a yes or a no?”

Toni glared. “You’re worse than a gossiping grandma, you know.”

“I’ve been stuck behind a desk ever since that mission that messed up my knee. I’ve got to find a distraction somewhere.”

“Right.”

They fell into companionable silence, right up until Doug leaned forward once more. “So?”

Toni groaned. Doug grinned.

Toni was suspiciously quiet when he escorted her home later that day. She’d fallen silent after their little bout of teasing, gazing at nothing in particular with something akin to longing on her face, and nothing he did or said managed to really cheer her up. For all that he’d have loved to know what was on her mind so he could help, he knew that Toni would only snark at him if he tried to pry, so he remained silent and hoped for the best.

Lethal and sassy she may be, but Antonia Galante had wormed her way into his heart surprisingly fast, and he wanted her to be happy. As it was, he wasn’t too happy himself at the thought of leaving her alone in that kind of mood.
But then, as they were coming into view of her house, she froze, breath hitching. Doug followed her gaze, and to the man lounging in front of the steps, clad in a bottle green infantry uniform.
Chapter 2

Although they could only see his back from where they stood, Doug could tell that he was handsome, dark hair peeking out from under that cheeky cap, shoulders squared with confidence and hands deep in his pockets.

He turned as he paced, only to stop himself as he noticed them, a grin splitting his face.

“Antonia!” He called, waving, and Doug stopped short as he glanced down at his companion. Her eyes were bright and burning with life, a wide smile stretching her lips and crinkling the corner of her eyes in a display of joy he’d never seen on her before.

“Mister James!” She rushed forward, and he swept her up in his arms, her arms swinging around his neck and squeezing tight as she laughed out loud. The soldier pressed his face into her hair, the crook of her neck for a second, eyes closed as he inhaled, then grudgingly set her down and took a step back, arm sliding around her waist.

And Doug understood what the quiet had been about. Because this man had eyes only for Toni, and Toni looked back at him with the same light. Nodding as the man met his eyes for a brief second, Doug turned and left.

“When did you get back?” Toni asked.

“Just this morning.” James hesitated briefly, then chose to go for the truth, knowing that was what Toni would want. “I’m shipping out in a week.” His heart clenched in his chest as she deflated, but the sadness was gone in an instant, replaced by determination, and he smiled at her. That was Antonia. Strong and willful.

“Then we’ll just have to make the most of it, won’t we, soldier?”

The man grinned. “Sure we will. Starting with the future.”

She quirked an eyebrow at him. “And what’s that?”

“You’ll see tomorrow at nine o’clock, for starters.” He laughed, ducking with a short burst of laughter as she punched him playfully. “I’ll pick you up here. In the meantime, how about a walk?”

She took the offered arm. The sun was setting over the city, lighting up the buildings and windows, projecting ethereal shadows. The park was already closed when they got to it, but that had never deterred Toni before, and James obviously didn’t have any compunctions about jumping fences either. He made to help her over once he was on the other side, but she just winked, backed up a little for a running start, and easily vaulted over the fence. Obviously, whoever had designed it didn’t have athletic people in mind.

The East River was on fire as they walked through the park, the skyline tainted orange and red as the light dimmed into night, buildings casting their reflection upon the quiet waters like a small galaxy. It was getting a bit chilly, but Toni didn’t mind, her attention devoted to the man walking by her side, his arm a solid reminder that he was back, and she didn’t let herself dwell on the fact that it was only for the week.

“...and so Finson ended up cleaning the toilets with a toothbrush for a week. Poor guy stank like crazy by the end of the second day, but he deserved it.”
Toni laughed. “Sounds like you found your place in the army, after all.”

James hummed. “I was expecting worse, I admit, but it turned out to be...surprisingly fulfilling. But that was only boot camp, and I have no illusions that the frontline won’t be very different.”

“No,” Toni agreed quietly, “I don’t imagine it will.”

They walked in silence for a moment. “What about you?” James asked after a while. “How have you been? Did anything interesting happen?”

Toni remained quiet a moment. “Not really, unless you count an increasing amount of propaganda movies. I got...promoted, I suppose you could say, so it’s possible I’ll have to travel a bit soon.”

“Any particular destination?” James had tried asking about her job, once, but she’d only said she fixed things and left it at that, so he’d taken the hint and hadn’t brought it up again.

“Not really. I don’t know. I probably won’t know until the last minute. But don’t worry,” she quickly added, “nothing before you leave. You’ll have me all to yourself for the entire week.”

“Good. I would hate to have to kick some butts so soon after leaving boot camp.”

She laughed at that. “It’s good to have you back.”

“It’s good to be back. Honestly, I wasn’t sure I would see you again. This was a good surprise.”

She smiled up at him, and he smiled right back. “I missed you, Miss Antonia. I don’t know what it is about you, we haven’t known each other that long, but I enjoy your company.”

Toni looked away, something heavy in her throat. He was so young, so bright. He wasn’t like her, old and tired and tainted. There were so many things he didn’t know about her. She didn’t deserve him, and yet, she found herself irresistibly drawn to him, his crooked smile and charm, his ravaging wit. He was a good man, and she hated the thought of that bright nature of his on the battlefield. She’d seen firsthand what war did to people. What it had done—would do to him.

“You don’t know anything about me,” she choked.

“I know enough.”

“No.” She stopped, turned abruptly. His arm hung awkwardly by his side when she let go. “No, you don’t understand. You don’t know anything. I could be anyone, what do you know about my past? I’m not some innocent girl, James, I’m—”

“I know enough,” James interrupted, continuing before she could protest. “I know you’re lonely, beautiful, smart and witty. I know you’re strong and that you don’t like to be treated like a wilting flower. I know you like your coffee black and that you drink at least three mugs of it every day. I also know that your past was no bed of roses and that you’re not used to be taken care of, and you could have turned into a terrible human being, but you chose to stop to comfort a depressed stranger on the sidewalk one morning instead.” He paused for a deep breath. “That’s a pretty good start, don’t you think?”

She was staring at him, lips ajar, the picture of astonishment. With the lights of the city playing on her profile, she made for a stunning sight, the shadows enhancing her cheekbones and the curve of her lips. Gently, he grabbed her limp hand between his.

“I may not know everything there is to know, but I’ve seen enough to tell you’re a good person, and
that’s all I need to know.”

Toni tried to breathe, eyes burning, but it came out as a short, broken little noise. Her heart was pounding in her chest. She didn’t know what she’d done to deserve this, and she was still convinced it would come back to bite her in the ass one day, probably sooner rather than later. She was a time traveler, a woman out of her time, and sure, she’d made a life for herself here, but she hadn’t even been able to keep herself out of trouble. Instead, she’d chosen to become a freaking secret agent of all things, and involved herself directly with the greatest terrorist organization of all time.

This had all the chances of ending badly. Because there was so much blood on her hands, because she was a sarcastic, selfish bitch, because she’d never known how to handle people when it came to anything other than manipulating the press, because she’d proven time and again that she sucked at relationships. Because James was a soldier, and this was World War II, and she already knew he would never come back. Because she was an OSS agent currently infiltrating HYDRA, and she would probably not make it either.

And yet…

“I enjoy your company, too.” She snapped her mouth shut. James’ eyes were soft. He cupped her face with one hand. She leaned into the touch, eyes fluttering shut. It had been...a very long time since anyone had touched her like this, gently. Without any hidden agenda.

“Antonia…” his voice was low and raspy, and she opened her eyes to look at him, taking in his clean-shaven jaw, his dark hair, the cap cheekily perched on his head, the muscled body under that spotless uniform. His expression was gentle as he studied her in return. “I would like to court you.”

She gaped at him. “James…”

“I know the circumstances are far from ideal. I’m going to war in Europe and we’ll be apart a very long time. You probably don’t want to saddle yourself with an absent man. And we haven’t known each other for very long either, but I would be honored if you would allow me to court you.” His voice was steady and firm, and she found herself nodding even before she realized it. It was the first time someone asked her out so respectfully, treated her like an actual human being instead of a billionaire bitch to be sucked dry of her money, put back in her place or manipulated into something. Pepper had always treated her with an underlying exasperation which had culminated into her quitting twice, and Rhodey…Rhodey was complicated.

She’d always had the feeling that he’d never really forgiven her for SI’s reconversion. Then, he’d stolen her suit, and that had broken something between them. Because she’d trusted him with her life and tech, and he’d abused it, turned around and stabbed her in the back, revealing where his true loyalties lay all this time. Not with her. She’d tried to pretend nothing had changed after that, and he’d apologized profusely when he’d finally realized what had been going on, told by Pepper, who’d been choking on a mixture of rage and horror. He’d tried to make amends, and she’d left him the suit as a sort of apology for her behavior, but he’d known her too well and for too long, and he knew her trust issues like the back of his hand. He knew she didn’t trust him like she used to, she’d seen it in the mournful gazes he would sometimes sneak at her when he thought no one was looking.

The Civil War had upset the balance between them. Theoretically, she knew it wasn’t her fault that he’d been paralyzed. And he’d never blamed her for it, either. He’d stood by her against Rogers, but she wasn’t sure how much of that had been his friendship with her, and how much had been his loyalty to the government. But Rhodey had stood with her, and that was more than any of the others, save Vision, had done.

Then, the Avengers had come, SHIELD with them, and they had tolerated her at best. Iron Man,
yes. Toni Stark...not recommended. The label had stuck to her skin like glue, and they’d never rescinded her status as a consultant, never fully integrated her into the team. Even though she housed, fed, armed and clothed the team, even though she provided them with the best tech in the world, spent a considerable amount of her time working on upgrades for them, watching out for them during battles, and cleaning up their mess after, they’d never made her into a full-fledged Avenger.

She was, at best, an annoyance. Tolerated. And Toni had been under no illusions that, were she to lose her money and gadgets, the team wouldn’t leave her behind like dirt, and never look back.

After all, she hadn’t even needed to lose anything for the entire team to leave her behind like an obsolete toy. Captain America had whistled, and they’d all come running like the good mutts they were, so blinded by their faith and liking of him they never realized he’d never even read the Accords before saying no, or that he’d been using and discarding them all to protect one man. The very same man who now looked at her like she was his equal, and what did that say about her? He talked to her with honesty, and remained respectful while still not treating her like a swooning damsels in distress. He knew how abrasive she could be, how unladylike she truly was—although he’d yet to see her fight, but unlike Fury and Rogers, he didn’t frown disapprovingly and rant about language and behavior and team play. Unlike Bruce, James laughed at her jokes, cracked inappropriate jokes of his own. Unlike Pepper and Natasha, he listened when she talked instead of rolling his eyes and tuning her out. Unlike Clint, he didn’t visit and talk to her because he wanted something from her. Unlike Thor, he willingly sought her out to spend time together, and didn’t rant about the superiority of all things Jane and Asgard whenever he was around her.

“I’m not a nice person,” she warned, because really, that was the only thing she could come up with. James snorted.

“I’m not exactly sunshine and roses either.”

“And I suck at relationships.”

“I’ve never had a real one myself.”

“And I make a ton of inappropriate jokes, too. I’m insensitive as hell.”

“Are you scared of hurting my delicate sensibilities?”

“I—”

“Antonia.”

Her mouth snapped shut with an audible click. He tugged on her hands, gently, then wrapped his arms around her slim frame. “It’ll be fine,” he assured. “It’s not like we’re getting married.”

She nodded at that, took a step back, and instantly regretted the loss of warmth. “So, courting.”

James nodded. “Yes.”

She breathed in, slow and deliberate. It didn’t do much to calm the tumultuous beating of her heart. “Okay.”

He grinned. “C’mon, then. It’s getting late. I’ll pick you up tomorrow at eight for breakfast, so be ready, we have to be there at nine.”

She smiled, allowing herself to be tugged after him. “And where are we going again?”
“Haha!” he exclaimed dramatically, before putting a secretive finger to his lips and winking. “It’s a secret.” He paused, peered at her closely. They were close, so close their breaths were mingling, and she could feel the heat from his body. His eyes darted to her lips, and he leaned forward, slowly, careful to give her time to pull back, but she didn’t want to. He was so close, their lips were almost...

“Who goes there? You can’t be here! The park is closed!” James blinked as the thin beam of a flashlight suddenly fell upon them. He looked back down at Toni, lips curled up into a crooked smile. “It’s cold. Are you cold? You’re cold,” he laughed. “Let’s run!”

And then he took off, tugging her behind him, and she let out a peal of surprised laughter as she ran after him, the chilly night air whipping at her cheeks and hair. His palm was warm around hers, the coarse fabric of his uniform rubbing against her wrist. James’ laughter was warm and bright, gone as soon as it left his lips, carried away by the breeze. They vaulted over the fence once more and kept running, although there was no reason to. The thin layer of snow crusting the sidewalks, turned orange under the city lightings, crunched under every step.

James stopped abruptly as they rounded a corner, doubling over to rest his hands on his knees, panting. Toni leaned her back against the wall, fighting her laughter in between heavy gulps of air, but she was failing miserably, giggling like the reckless teenager she’d never been.

“Gosh,” James gasped, “you’d think...boot camp would’ve...given me...more stamina!”

Toni’s laughter began anew at that, until she was holding her stomach, tears of mirth running down her face. Only as it started winding down did she realize James had grown silent, and was watching her intently. She froze, tensing, and cautiously straightened up.

“What?”

“I wish you’d laugh more often. You’re gorgeous when you do.”

Toni’s breath stuttered. “Why, Mister James, should I take it to mean I don’t always look gorgeous?”

The crooked grin she received in return was breathtaking, boyish. Impish. God, what was she doing? This man was everything she’d ever wanted, everything she’d dreamed about as a naive twelve-year-old, lying in her bed with bruises all over her body and wishing for someone to take her away from this place, to stand up to her father like she never could.

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” Her cheeks burned at the open sincerity in his words, and damn him for being this honest and candid, because she hadn’t blushed in a very long time, years. She’d thought she’d mastered the art of flirtation and there was nothing that could surprise her anymore when it came to sex and hookups. But maybe that was the reason she felt so off-balance right now. Because this was different, and for all of her experience in one night stands and emotional manipulation, she’d never had someone interested in her and not her money or her fame or her body.

Fortunately, James must have caught on, because he just wrapped his fingers around her wrist once more and started walking, his breathing still a little heavy but otherwise back to normal. They parted at her door. Toni darted up the stairs and to her apartment, not even pausing to take off her coat and hat in favor of parting the curtains on the living room window to peer down at the street. James was still there, and he waved up at her when he caught sight of her face. She jumped a little. She’d expected him to be walking down the street, to be out of sight already, even. She waved back at him, blushing anew when he blew her a kiss before reluctantly walking away with a cheeky grin thrown over his shoulder.
There was a spring to his step, and when she went to bed that night, she couldn’t get rid of the goofy smile plastered on her face.

The surprise was Luna Park, over on Coney Island. It had been his promise before his departure, and she couldn’t believe he’d remembered, and even made good on it. The admission fee was a cheap 20 cents each given that it was the weekend, and then they were in, Toni looking around with wide eyes. The park hadn’t existed in her time, it’d been made into an apartment complex, and she couldn’t get enough of the sight, all those antiquated rides and the thousands of ways she could think of to make them better, safer, sleeker. Her fingers itched with the need to sketch, design and tweak, but she knew from experience that no one liked to hear her prattle about technology, so she just kept her reflections to herself.

They were walking up to the Cyclone rollercoaster—“Eighty-five foot drop at a sixty degrees angle, James, it would be a travesty to miss it!”—when they spotted the shooting gallery—“Wait, let’s shoot some things first!”

The carnie looked dubious when Toni asked for a gun too, but when James’ face only yielded an expectant look, he relented grudgingly, grumbling all the while that if the lass broke the gun, then they’d have to pay for it, and it was probably far above what they could afford. “You can shoot?” Toni smirked, pleased to note how he wasn’t doubting her ability, but instead sounded surprised that she had training, took aim, and fired. The first shot was off by a noticeable margin, but it was enough for her quick mind to calculate how to compensate for this old, less effective gun. She’s grown up using and designing the best weapons in the world, was used to the sleek, powerful perfection of Stark weapons. The old Winchester she was holding had nothing on them, but she wasn’t a genius for nothing.

The carnie, and the men around them, didn’t even have time to start laughing before she had reloaded and fired again, the small ping of a bullet hitting metal testifying to a perfect shot. The silence around them was deafening. This time, though, she made a show of reloading, acutely aware of her audience, and when she fired, she was looking up at James, who was watching her with something akin to fascination in his eyes, a wide grin growing on his face. Her remaining two shots hit bullseye again, and then she laid the rifle down and slid the shells over to the carnie.

“Just because I’m a woman doesn’t mean I can’t shoot better than you do, sugar. Your turn, Mister James. Show me what you’re made of.”

James laughed out loud. “Prepare for defeat!” He grabbed the Winchester, regretting his Springfield, heavier and more complicated, but he’d gotten used to it over his time in boot camp. The Springfield had helped him reveal his talent as a sniper, but the Winchester would do for today. This was not battle, just a game, one he planned on winning.

However, he hadn’t imagined the weight of the Winchester would throw him off that much, and he missed his first shot. The four following shots were spotless, but he and Antonia had tied. “Second row?” he asked. She laughed. “Whatever you say, sergeant! What’s my prize if I win?”

“Let me think about it and I’ll get back to you when I have an idea, yeah?”

“Sure. If you win, I’ll fix anything broken at your place. Deal?”

He shook her hand. “Deal.”

A crowd was gathering around them, attracted by the news that there was a contest going on at Ol’ Dick’s shooting gallery, and that one of the competitors was a woman, who, believe it or not,
handled a rifle like nobody’s business. James and Toni nodded solemnly at each other, then picked up their rifles, meticulously checking them over, before getting in position.

“Ladies first,” James mock-bowed.

Toni smiled sweetly. “Then it’s your turn.” The female part of the audience laughed at that. James laughed good-naturedly, and took his shot. Toni took hers immediately afterward, and so they took turns without pause. When they finally stopped, the results were obvious. Ten shots, ten fallen targets. Draw. James whistled among the applause.

“I wish I could take you with me. At least I’d know my back’s covered.”

“And what makes you think you wouldn’t be the one covering my back, Mister James?”

“Touché.”

“I ain’t got no more rewards,” Old Dick interrupted, “or none that you’d want, probably. How ‘bout a ticket for the photograph booth? You can get a picture for free. Always nice to have a picture of your best gal with you when ya leave for the front, officer.”

The man wasn’t wrong, thought Toni, and she really wanted that picture, too. They took the offer, headed off to the booth to have it done immediately. The pictures had to be in before they left, and they didn’t know how long it would take to have them developed. The carnie in charge, however, proved to be very understanding, and promised to develop them immediately, so they could come fetch them at closing time.

They sat on the narrow bench, Toni fidgeting until James decided to distract her. He wanted those photos to be perfect, and they wouldn’t be if Antonia kept moving like that.

“So,” he started, “we’ve got a weakening heater, an old radio you could probably make ten times better, and Stevie’s been complaining about the stove for a while.”

She looked up at him incredulously. “I won the contest. I don’t have to fix anything anymore,” she announced smugly.

“Ah, see, I remember five perfect shots on my part.”

“I have the same memory. By the way, you never said what my prize would be.”

“I don’t know. What do you want?”

“I want a lot of things, Mister James, none of which you can give me.” And it was true, or it had been, at last. She’d wanted her parents’ love and attention. She’d wanted someone to lean on and accept her. She’d wanted the Avengers to be her family. But none of that had happened, and James couldn’t do anything about it, not that she would ask him even if he could. The more time she spent with him, however, the more she found herself wanting other things, new things, and she wasn’t sure what to make of it, all those foreign emotions she couldn’t put a lid on no matter what.

James’ eyes danced with laughter as he leaned toward her, and she bent back a little, craning her neck to look him in the eye. “Are you sure? I’m an excellent singer. It would be a crime for you to miss up on the opportunity of a free concert. My shows don’t come for cheap, you know.” Toni looked away, feigning disinterest, even if the thought of James singing in the shower had her burning in the most delicious way.

She hummed. “Keep talking.”
“I make delicious waffles. They would make your day. And bacon pancakes, too, although that’s only for special occasions.” He paused, and then grinned boyishly. “I’d make them for you every day, because every day with you is a special occasion.”

It was so cheesy, so utterly corny and ridiculous, that she couldn’t help it. She looked at him, his crooked grin and the way his eyes sparkled, and she burst out laughing, mirth cascading warmly through her entire body, reveling in the sound of his warm chuckling, and that’s when the photographer triggered the camera.

They stopped for lunch at a food stand, eating on a picnic table overlooking the sea, then went on. At the end of the day, it was an exhausted couple the photo-booth carnie handed the pictures over to, a smile on his face. As they were about to uncover them, though, James lay a hand over Toni’s, who raised an eyebrow in question.

“Let’s not look at them.” At her confused look, he elaborated, “They’re souvenirs, right? Memories. For when I’m gone. But I’m here for now, and we’re together, so let’s just...keep them, and look at them later, when we can’t see each other for real.”

Toni’s grip tightened, her heart heavy in her chest. She wanted to scream at the unfairness of it all. She nodded quietly instead, handing one of the envelopes to James and keeping the other one for herself. James smiled at her, sadly, then wrapped his fingers around hers. The walk home was quiet, both too tired to initiate conversation or sustain it. Even Toni, usually so full of energy, could barely walk straight.

When they parted, she only had one thing to say.

“We have one week.”

And really, there was nothing to be done about it.

Sunday was picnic day. They were lucky in that the weather was fair and the temperature warm enough, but Monday meant Toni had to head back to OSS to train the newbies, and so they could only meet after that. The week went by in a haze of outings, although by the time Thursday came around, they decided to spend their time together at home rather than out, to enjoy each other’s company.

On the morning of James’ last day of permission, Toni was up early. James was right on time, and they headed to breakfast, during which she tried her best to find out where they were going, only for him to fend off each and every one of her efforts. James hailed a cab once they were done, making sure she couldn’t catch the address, then hopped in next to her. Her eyes widened once the car stopped. It was a gigantic park, an impressive crowd milling about despite the early hour, and a giant banner read: World Exposition of Tomorrow.

“You’re taking me to a science fair?” she questioned. James suddenly looked uncertain.

“Yeah, I, uh, I thought maybe you’d like it…”

“Are you kidding? Hurry up, let’s go in!” And this time, he was the one being dragged forward. Turned out, Antonia really, really liked science. She had something to say about each and every display, sometimes falling into jargon so technical James could only stare at her in utter bewilderment. Sure, he was no novice at engineering and mechanics—he’d worked a couple jobs at the garage and the hardware store so he knew his way around technology, but Antonia was very
obviously on another level entirely, hands waving in the air and calculations falling from her lips at incredible speed. Sometimes, she would cut herself off and jump to an entirely different subject, wondering about speed and heat resistance and waterproofing all in one breath, intermingled with increasingly complicated equations and considerations about metal alloys and fuels.

She stopped herself after ten minutes, glanced up at him, something guarded in her eyes. “I’m boring you, aren’t I?”

James’ eyebrows rose. “No, you’re not.”

But she wasn’t having any of it. “Yeah I am. That’s okay, most people can’t keep up with me, and the ones who can don’t care about tech or mechanics or science or anything, so, really, I’ll just shut up and let you enjoy the expo or something and—”

“Antonia,” James cut her off gently, “you’re not boring me. Sure, sometimes I’m having trouble understanding what you’re saying, but if you just explain it to me and go a little slower, I’m sure it’ll make sense. And I’m delighted that you like this, really. So…” he waved a hand at their surroundings, “by all means. Go on.”

She watched him silently, searching him for something. James resisted the urge to fidget under her scrutiny, tried to keep his face open and genuine. It was working, if the way her eyes rounded as she realized he was sincere was anything to go by.

“You really mean it,” she breathed.

“Of course I do.”

She smiled up at him a bit tentatively. There was something new in her gaze, though, something close to wonder, and also some indescribable emotion he couldn’t put his finger on as she looked at him, and he felt his heart warm and clench at the same time, because he felt like he’d just strengthened their relationship immensely, and yet, there had to be a reason she was like this. The thought of the sheer number of rejections she must have gone through when talking about something she was obviously passionate about, of the people who’d cut her off and dismissed her brilliance in the past, had him clenching his fists.

She stood a little closer to him after that, their fingers brushing from time to time, and started again, this time explaining things thoroughly so he would understand what she was going on about. And truly, James realized, she was a genius. She could tell how things worked at a glance, and if not, which was rare, then she had multiple theories to make up for it along with ways to improve the design or mechanism.

She was fascinating, and James wondered what she would be like in a workshop full of tools, with the resources to build, invent, and tinker. The marvels she could bring to the world...

The loudspeakers crackled, and James wrapped his fingers around her wrist. “C’mon, we can’t miss this!”

The crowd was steadily moving in one single direction, so they followed, hands clasped together tightly until they were stood in front of a large stage with a bright red car on display. Toni glanced up. Her blood froze in her veins.

Stark Industries.

Oh no. Oh, hell no.
“Antonia?” She didn’t even notice she was turning until James grabbed her arm. “What’s wrong?”

She couldn’t very well tell him why she couldn’t bear the mere mention of Howard Stark’s name, or why the mere thought of seeing his face made her sick to her stomach. He’d been dead and buried for over twenty years, and still she hadn’t managed to free herself of his shadow. And he’d found her now that she had even displaced herself in another time entirely?

Her eyes darted from side to side, frantically looking for an escape. There were so many people everywhere, surely she could get lost in the crowd and…

“Anto—”

“Bucky!”

James turned around, waved at Steve, who was making his way over to them. Sure that his friend knew where he was, he looked back at Antonia, only to find only empty air where she’d been standing a split second ago. He looked around, but all he could see was an ocean of faces all facing forward, then hats and curls moving around.

“What’s going on?” Steve asked concernedly as he neared.

“Antonia’s gone.”

Steve frowned, confused. “Who’s Antonia?”

“She’s...she was here a second ago. I turned and…”

“Bucky...Bucky, hey!” James turned to Steve, a sharp reply on his tongue, but deflated when he noticed his friend’s concern.

“Maybe she went to the bathroom.”

“She would have told me,” James protested, much to Steve’s amusement.

“Maybe she was embarrassed. Or maybe she did and you didn’t hear her. It’s awfully loud in here. Just give her a minute, okay?”


“Who’d have known, uh? Don’t let it get to your head, though. I still remember that incident with Janice…” Steve turned as red as the car on the stage.

“Jenna! And it wasn’t my fault! You know that—” The rest of his words got lost in the tremendous applause and music of Howard Stark’s entrance. The man sauntered onto the stage, making a show of kissing the girl closest to him, then started his show, and James found himself engrossed in the demonstration. “Holy cow,” he breathed as the car took off, floating a foot off the ground. It made him giddy, the thought of such technology everywhere in the world, what the future would bring. Antonia would love it, too.

Except, Antonia was nowhere to be seen. And, of course, neither was Steve. James sighed, rubbing his forehead.

Steve, first. At least, he knew where to find him.
“Ladies and gentlemen! What if I told you that in just a few short years…”

Toni gasped as her dead father’s voice boomed over the crowd, undeterred by the delighted squealing of the children pointing at nearby exhibits, the pounding of her heartbeat in her ears. He sounded smug. He sounded light-hearted. He sounded young. He sounded like the very man she’d grown up dodging from and not at all at the same time. But all she could see as he kept prattling on about his own genius, was a raised hand and broken glass. All she could hear was the incoherent roar of an enraged drunk. All she could taste was the bitter tang of blood and fear on her tongue.

Stark men are made of iron, he’d always say. She was no man, had never been. What did that make her, then? Toni was weak, she’d broken under his hand, building increasingly dangerous weapons for him even long after his death. She hadn’t been enough for him or for her mother, and when Howard’s hero had finally turned up alive and still as strong as ever, she’d been found lacking by him, too.

One day, James would wake up, look at her, and then he would see what they had seen, what the Avengers had seen, and SHIELD, and the rest of the world.

Antonia Stark was a pathetic excuse for a human being, a failure, hiding behind a mask of fake self-confidence and arrogance and fake-reveling in the unexplored depths of her genius. Smart she may be, but it had never helped her when she’d been begging for her father’s love, or his attention or, later on, his mercy.

Her breathing was speeding up. Her heart felt like it was pressing against the cold metal of the synthetic sternum where the arc reactor had once been embedded, pain blooming around the contraption, spreading through her chest and into her throat, choking her. Her body was like a blaze, sweat running down her back and beading at her temples. She looked around through blurry eyes, frantically looking for some quiet place to seek refuge in, and ducked into an empty corridor. She’d barely made it a few steps in before she slid down the wall, hands clasped between her knees to keep them from shaking. A lost cause: her entire body was quivering, her stomach rolling as remembered pain seared through her arms, her legs, her very bones…

The world was fading around her. She gasped, her mouth wide open, fist slamming over the arc reactor’s replacement, over and over again. Her fingers dug around into soft flesh, but the pain wouldn’t go away. It kept creeping all over her body, until there was nothing but the sheer agony sinking deep into her blood, her bones, her soul.

She knew panic attacks, was no stranger to them ever since childhood. Although they’d become rarer and rarer as the years passed after her father’s death, Afghanistan had brought them back with a vengeance, and while that had receded, too, her stint in outer space had renewed them as well. Then, there had been Ultron, and of course the Accords disaster, and, well… Every time it seemed like she was over them, like she’d finally moved on, something happened that made her start all over again, and Toni was exhausted, tired of fighting against the world and herself to just live like a normal human being. Mostly, she welcomed the darkness of unconsciousness, the only time she could rest properly, undisturbed by nightmares and the accusing faces of the people who wanted her to be more, to be something she could never be.

This time, though, something anchored her, something she didn’t even notice until the haze that had fallen over her vision receded enough for her to see through her tears. A blurry face framed by curly brown hair, red lipstick, and a gentle voice soothing her back to reality. She didn’t want to go back. She just wanted to sleep.

“There,” the woman murmured, and Toni slowly realized that she was rubbing her arms and that was
the motion that had kept her from sinking deeper. “You’re safe, you’re okay. Can you hear me? Do you understand what I’m saying?”

Toni nodded, raising a trembling hand to wipe her tears. In other circumstances, her pride would have reared in outrage, stopped her from showing weakness in front of a stranger. She was Toni Stark, for God’s sake. She was loud, abrasive and insensitive, stronger than any of them. She was Toni Stark, and she’d been broken for so long she didn’t even know what it meant to be whole anymore.

“You need to breathe. In, out. In and out. Follow my lead. There, you’re doing great.”

Whoever she was, the woman was great at dealing with this, and Toni couldn’t help but be absurdly grateful for it as her panic receded and she found herself breathing again, eyes clearing. She slumped against the wall, lids sliding shut in exhaustion. She felt hollow. The pieces of her identity were flying further and further away from her with each obstacle she faced, each enemy she defeated, each life she took, and every fight was like another chip of her soul crumbling to dust. How much was left, she didn’t know, but it probably wasn’t much.

And there she was in 1943, a different time period all together, and instead of calling it quits like she should have, instead of taking the chance to mend what was left of her heart and soul, she’d volunteered herself as a secret agent to spy on HYDRA.

A bitter laugh escaped her, tinged with hysteria.

“My name is Peggy,” the woman said when she calmed. “Peggy Carter. Do you want me to call a cab for you?”

Toni shook her head to cover her surprise. How come she kept running into key players? Sure, she could have understood if it were during her work as an OSS agent, but this was just...coincidence.

Or was it?

She didn’t know, and her brain was far too hazy for her to reflect on the question. Carter, at least, was supposed to be one of the good guys, so she wasn’t planning on murdering her in her sleep. Probably.

“No, I—” she swallowed thickly. “I’m not here alone.”

Carter raised her eyebrows, glanced around pointedly. “Did they go for help?”

“He doesn’t...I didn’t tell him I was...” Since when was speaking such a chore? Moving her jaw was exhausting.

“Okay,” Carter said. “You might want to freshen up a little if you want to join him again, then.”

Toni snorted. “That bad?”

Carter shrugged, a smile tugging at her lips. She stood and extended her hand. “Come on.” Toni let her pull her to her feet, and then they were off to the bathroom, weaving between people and shrieking kids.

“Antonia!”

Toni froze. The bathroom was in sight, maybe... But there was a hand on her shoulder already, and James’ presence at her back, his voice filled with concern as he asked where she’d been, if she was
okay… He quieted abruptly as he caught sight of her face, hand sliding from her shoulder like he’d been burned.

“Antonia?” he murmured, low and tense, and she bit her lip at the sheer intensity in his tone, the deep worry vibrating in every syllable. “What happened? Did someone hurt you?” He was angry at the thought, she could feel it, but she didn’t have the energy to stop him. She just wanted to go home and curl up in her bed, sleep for an eternity, and maybe never wake up.

So she mutely shook her head, leaning into his touch as he cupped her face gently between his palms. “I’m fine,” she muttered. He scoffed at that.

“No you’re not. But you will be. I’ll take care of you.”

She went willingly when he pulled her forward, and she buried her face in his chest as if it could keep away the world around them. His arms muffled the din of the exhibition a little, and she breathed, deep and shaky, a trembling sob still in her voice.

“James Barnes,” she heard James say above her head. His chest rumbled as he spoke, a deep, comforting sound. She wanted to listen to it for hours on end and fall asleep to it.

A feminine voice replied—Carter, probably. Toni knew she should feel bad for forgetting all about her, but she didn’t have the energy. Instead, she settled for saving her strength for the inevitable moment when she would have to face the world again. It was a daunting perspective.

James and Carter’s conversation was short, but James didn’t move when the woman left, apparently content to let Toni rest. His fingers ran through Toni’s thick black curls, mindful of her hat, and he kept up a steady stream of chatter, talking about this idiot friend of his who was still doing his damnedest to enlist and was at his fifth try already, with a different name every time.

He talked about this club he’d heard about that he wanted to try out, he’d wanted to take her dancing for a long time, because those times they’d gone before his departure didn’t count, they hadn’t been courting yet, after all. This time, though, he looked forward to holding her in his arms, looking into her arms and maybe getting to kiss her before they parted ways. They played Cole Porter at the club, and Dame Vera Lynn, too, and Frank Sinatra and Benny Goodman and Glenn Miller. From what he’d heard, tons of officers took their best girls and wives there during permissions, and hey, he was an officer now, wasn’t he, so there was no reason for him not to use it to his advantage and blow his best girl’s mind.

At last, Toni felt she could bear to face the outside without falling apart completely, and she shifted slightly, which James took for the signal it was. She didn’t understand how, after less than a month together, he could read her so well. No one had ever caught up so quickly before, not even Rhodey. James, though, he got her.

“Thank you,” she rasped.

“Do you want to go home?” He already knew, but he waited for her nod before turning to the exit, his arm around her shoulders. Outside, he hailed a cab, glaring at whoever dared to stare at Toni’s no doubt blotted face, red eyes and ruined makeup, and ushered her inside. Exhaustion hit her hard as soon as she sat, and she collapsed on his shoulder all over again. She was half-asleep when the car stopped, and barely coherent enough to get out. She vaguely remembered trying to give him the keys, but a soft reassurance was enough to make her relent, and then, there was nothing but sweet, blessed quiet and darkness.
Steve got home late, looking exhausted but suspiciously happy, and James straightened on the couch, dread like lead in the pit of his stomach.

_They’ll actually take you!_ He remembered warning earlier, terrified at the thought of his skinny, asthmatic friend on the battlefield. He should have known that, to Steve, the threat would come as an opportunity and— God, what had possessed him to say something like that, he’d probably given the punk an idea and it had actually worked this time! _God, please, no, please, please—_

“I got in,” Steve announced triumphantly.

James closed his eyes. His heart was clenched so tight in his chest it felt like it would implode. “Goddammit, Steve,” he whispered.

“I thought I was doomed at first, the doctor looked pretty dubious, but then this other doctor came in and just...asked why I wanted to fight and stamped it.” He paused, beaming excitedly, energy vibrating through his tiny body, and wasn’t it sad, James thought, that the flush of health was brought to his cheeks by the perspective of getting himself killed? James wanted to scream at him, to shake him until he understood just what he’d done. He wanted to find the imbecile who’d thought it would be funny to send a 90-pound twig to war with deficient lungs and color-blindness.

Most of all, he wanted to slap himself unconscious, because for all that he’d warned Steve against war, for all that he’d told him to quit it and enjoy being alive and safe home while others were getting themselves maimed and tortured and ripped to shreds thousands of miles away from their families, it had never crossed his mind that someone would give Steve a chance. And now, the punk had got his ticket to boot camp and couldn’t stop ranting about some sort of experimental program he was part of and yet didn’t know the first thing about.

“Top secret,” he said, “and they chose me. _Me!_” He looked dazed, and obviously didn’t realize the implications. Scrawny and orphaned, no one to ask questions if something happened to him in this “experimental program,” no one bar an army sergeant who would probably get himself killed as most officers did these days.

“God I can’t believe you,” James said, a little louder this time, and Steve’s babbling came to an abrupt halt. Standing up was a chore. He wished Steve would leave so he wouldn’t have to fight the urge to yell at him. Steve would only stick his nose up and his chin out, dig his heels in and yell right back, he knew, but James just couldn’t understand such stupidity.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Steve asked, and yeah, he was already gearing up for a fight, eyes stormy in a way that would make grown men cower if he weren’t so small. But it was his rising voice that caught James’ attention, and his reply was so sharp Steve reeled back.

“Keep it down. I’m not fighting with you tonight.”

“Oh, really? And why not?” Steve challenged.

“Because Antonia’s sleeping in my room, and if you wake her up, I’ll kill you.”

Steve’s mouth shut with an audible click. “You brought a dame here? _You?_” And maybe James would have taken the time to be offended in other circumstances, but right now, he just felt weary and angry, so very angry. But Steve wasn’t done. “Is that the same dame you lost earlier today?”

“Yes.”

“So where was she?”
“Somewhere,” James replied vaguely, knowing it would infuriate his friend. Good thing, too, he thought savagely. The punk deserved it and more.

“You never bring them home, though,” and now Steve was watching carefully, which was a far cry from his usual reaction to James’ lady-killer ways. He straightened, eyes sharp and focused. “Are you actually courting her?”

“What if I am?”

Steve looked thrown at his aggressiveness. “I don’t know, I just… I guess I never pictured you settling down.”

“Gee, thanks Stevie. This conversation keeps getting better and better!”

“I’m not the one who’s pissed off here!”

“Damn right I’m pissed off, and with damn good reason, too!” The abundant use of swearwords made Steve flinch—whether because of the language or because James only ever cursed when he was really furious was up to debate—but James ignored it. “But we’re not going to talk about this tonight, so you better leave me alone right now so I can calm down.”

“This is my apartment too.”

“Just don’t stay in the living room.”

Steve paused on his way to the kitchen. “Are you sleeping here?”

“Where else would I sleep?” James snapped, arranging blankets and pillows.

Steve’s furtive glance at James’ room was telling, and James’ rage abruptly went cold, the anger bubbling in his gut settling into a frozen lake. Was this really how Steve saw him? A guy who couldn’t keep it in his pants? There was a bitter taste in his mouth as he watched his best friend hover on the threshold for a moment. Had this war really changed them both so much without either of them actually making it to the front? James didn’t understand what had become of them, and he didn’t feel like looking into it at the moment. Steve, thankfully, chose to remain silent, disappearing into the kitchen with a shrug. A few seconds later, James heard the clanging—muted, Steve’s Ma had been incredibly strict on manners, and what would she think of her boy now?—of pots and pans as the punk made himself something to eat.

It was only after Steve retreated to his room for the night that James managed to fall asleep. He’d wished to spend his last evening home having fun with his best friend and his best girl, to introduce them at last, but it seemed it wasn’t to be. His fists clenched as he wondered what could have pushed Antonia, who was resilient and strong like no one he’d ever met, to have such a serious breakdown. Miss Carter hadn’t really been able to help, only saying she’d found Antonia curled up in a side hallway, in the middle of a severe panic attack. James hadn’t liked the weird look on the woman’s face as she had explained. It had been too…intense to be mere concern, calculating, almost.

Why did he have to leave right when this happened? Did it happen often? And Miss Carter had mentioned triggers, that something must have happened to cause Antonia’s breakdown. How many triggers did Antonia have? Was it dangerous? Were there ways to prevent the episodes? And what if she had one and no one was around to help? What then?

He hadn’t wanted to leave before, because he knew better men had gone and never come back. Now, though, now he had another reason entirely, one that made him want to dig his heels in and find a way, any way, to remain here on the home front and support Antonia. Yet he knew with
absolute certainty that she would be furious with him if she ever heard that. Antonia was fiercely proud and independent, and would never stand for James to risk everything to, as she would perceive it, baby her.

It was a bad situation all around, and there was nothing he could do, just as there had been nothing Antonia could do to stop his being drafted. James would be leaving in the morning, and Antonia would stay here, and that would be it. All they could do was take what little time they had left and support each other the best they could. Antonia had known that from the very beginning.

The scream ripped him from sleep. James tumbled to the ground with a grunt of surprise. It took only a second to register what had happened, and another one to process the voice. Antonia. The room was pitch black as he slammed the door open, except for a tenuous sliver of moonlight somehow streaming through the blinds and tinging the room in cold, blueish light.

“Antonia!” She was there, tangled in the covers.

“I’ll be good,” she mumbled in reply, and he thought she was awake, but the cadence was off, and she wasn’t stopping, repeating it over and over again. A nightmare. He should have expected it. Whatever had triggered her panic attack earlier must have brought back painful memories which were bound to attack her in her sleep.

He barely registered Steve sleepily asking what was going on, just strode over to the bed and gently tugged the covers out from under Antonia with one hand, and cupped her face with the other.

“There, you’re safe, Antonia. You’re safe, everything’s fine, everything’s okay. It’s gone now, you’re alright. I’ve got you.”

The mumbling stopped. Her eyes were hazy, fogged over with fear when she registered his presence, but then they cleared and she relaxed. “James?” she rasped.

“I’m here.”

“I’m sorry…”

“It’s alright. Don’t worry about it. Do you need something?”

She shook her head. A long shiver ran down her spine, her brow creasing with remembered pain and phantom terror. James smoothed a hand over her forehead, smiling when she closed her eyes with a sigh of content. Her breathing slowly calmed, and he made to leave when it seemed she was asleep again, only for her fingers to catch weakly on his sleeve.

“Stay with me?”

James glanced over at the door, at Steve’s barely visible form. “Always,” he whispered, and climbed into bed with Antonia. It was weird, to hold her in his arms like that, lying in bed together. It should have had him burning with desire and inappropriate thoughts. Yet, for all that Antonia was attractive, what she needed right now was a comfort of another kind, and he willingly provided it. He’d never been one to take advantage of a dame’s weakness, and he certainly wouldn’t start now, with Antonia, who was so special and had been there for him when no one else had. So he wrapped her up in his arms, rested his chin on the top of her head, and closed his eyes.

Toni nuzzled into her pillow, relishing in the warmth and smell of it, brain still fuzzy with sleep and contentment, she groaned when it moved, and tightened her arms around it when it stilled. It was firm and soft at the same time, and the perfect temperature. The forties were cold, or at least that was
the feeling she’d come to associate with them, as she was deprived from her perfectly heated penthouse and comfy duvet, sleeping instead between coarse sheets and with a whimsical oil heater to keep herself warm.

So then, why was it so warm in here? As a matter of fact, her pillow was usually...squishier. She squeezed it experimentally, only to freeze when it squirmed in her grip, a muffled snicker sounded above her head. Toni’s eyes snapped open, and she shot up, only for a hand to close around her wrist and drag her right back down.

“Good morning.” She gaped at James, lying there in blue-striped pajamas, his hair tousled and his eyes bright with humor.

“Morning,” she replied automatically, settling back down on his chest as he began to play with her hair. She hummed softly, but in the end, she had to ask. “Hum, James?”

His hand fell down on her shoulder, which he squeezed. “Nothing happened,” he assured. “You had a nightmare and asked me to stay.” There was no judgment in his voice at all, but she didn’t dare look at his face.

“Sorry,” she mumbled.

He pressed a gentle kiss to the crown of her head. “Are you feeling better?”

She tightened her grip on him and closed her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“Hmm, even if you’re not, you will be. I’ll make sure of it.”

She tensed at that, but didn’t say anything, and it was difficult not to loosen up when his thumb started rubbing circles on her shoulder. “Thank you,” she muttered at last.

“We need to get up,” James said after a while, only getting a warning squeeze in response. He squirmed a bit as Antonia’s fingers dug into his sides, and then rolled onto his side to face her. She grumbled a little at the loss of her pillow, but shifted to accommodate him, slipping one hand under her head, the other resting on the sheet between them. James took it in his own and brought it close to his chest.

“If I don’t come back,” James murmured at last, only to be shushed by a finger on his lips.

“You will,” she said sharply, ferociously.

“Antonia,” he said, clasping her hand in his again. She turned away, furiously refusing to look at him.

“No.”

“Listen to me, please.” He tried to put as much emotion as he could in his words, and was rewarded when, after a moment, Toni turned back to him. “Antonia. If I die—”

Her good will apparently ran out after three words, because she snapped. “I’m not listening to this.”

“Why?” He growled, frustrated. “It’s important!”

“Because you’re going to come back!” She said loudly. “There’s no other option here, James!”

“You’re being stupid. You know where I’m going, chances are—”
"No, you're being stupid! The difference between dead and alive is very simple. It's a matter of stubbornness. If you don't go determined to come back in one piece, you're already dead."

"I don't exactly control the bullets shot at me, Antonia!" James shouted, anger making him shoot up in bed.

"No, you don't. But trust me. If you decide you'll come back, you will. One way or another, you will."

He almost missed the depth in her words, the darkness in her eyes. His mouth was already open for a scathing retort about women never having to step on a battlefield when he noticed, and he snapped it shut.

"How would you know?" He asked instead, forcing his temper down but his tone still curt.

She smiled, but it wasn't a nice smile. Rather, it was cold and twisted, dripping with bitterness and pain. "I know. I'll tell you someday, James, but you need to trust me. Do you want to come back?"

"Yes, of course," he answered automatically, puzzling over her previous statement.

"Will you do whatever it takes for it?" She elaborated as he remained silent. "If they shoot, fire back. If they charge, snipe them. If they catch you, survive and escape. If you die…" her lips twisted into that bitter smile once again "...walk it off."

He stared at her, dumbfounded and amazed. The steel in her voice, her spine. Her flinty orbs. You don't know anything about me, she'd said, and it was true. He didn't. But in that moment, he could only gape and think: God, she's beautiful. He surged forward, arms wrapping around her, and she stiffened.

"James?" She asked uncertainly, but he only buried his face in the crook of her shoulder.

"What did I do to deserve you?" He mumbled into her hair, and she must have caught it, because she tensed and relaxed almost immediately after, hands coming up to rub his back. How could she have such faith in him after only three weeks, he didn't know, but he knew he couldn't disappoint her, knew he would survive one way or another, if only for her, to prove her right. And so, pulling back to look her in the eye, he whispered them, the words every soldier knew never to say and sometimes intoned anyway.

"I will come back," he solemnly swore. "I promise."

And she smiled, small but genuine, a hand to his cheek. "See that you do, soldier."

He bridged the gap between them until they were brow to brow, breaths mingling and fingers intertwined on the rumpled sheets between them. They lay back down, much closer than before, James tugging the covers back over them to ward off the slight chill of the room.

They didn't say anything, just lay there looking at each other. James let his eyes rove over Antonia's face, committing her features to memory, from her tanned skin to her soulful hazel eyes and long lashes, from the curve of her eyebrows to the black hair curling into the crook of her shoulder.

He had a feeling she was doing the same, and he waited until her gaze wasn't flickering all over his face anymore to move, grudgingly sitting up and swinging his legs off the bed at the same time that a knock came at the door.

"Bucky?" Steve's muffled voice sounded from the other side. "You're going to be late if you don't
James snorted, rolling his eyes. “Coming! Can you believe this?” He added, turning to look at Antonia. “He sounds like my Ma.”

She snickered and sat up as well, frowning down at her wrinkled clothes. Padding over to her shoes, she slipped them on, then opened the door and ducked into the bathroom.

“Breakfast’s ready,” Steve’s voice called out from the kitchen. He was busy transferring eggs to three different plates, along with some toast and bacon. “I assumed your...Antonia would eat with us.”

“You assumed correctly,” James smirked. “It’s good you two can finally meet. You can keep each other company.”

“I’m leaving the day after tomorrow, Bucky,” Steve pointed out, and, just like that, James’ good mood evaporated.

“Still going on about that, huh?”

Steve tensed at his tone, but his eyes were determined and his jaw squared in that way that showed he wouldn’t budge on the issue. “I finally have a chance. I’m not letting it go.”

“You’re just being stubborn. This program stinks!”

“And how would you know that? You don’t know anything about it!” Steve was getting worked up, but James didn’t care, because he was feeling pretty hot himself.

“Because obviously you don’t know a single thing about it! Steve! You could have signed up to be a guinea pig for experiments for all you know!”

“That’s not what it is, I’m not an idiot, Bucky.”

“Yeah? Because you sure act like one these days!”

“I want to protect my country! You of all people should understand that! You enlisted, Bucky, behind my back. You knew I wanted to go, and you enlisted! And now that I found a way to go as well, you want me to stop? This is important, I can’t just sit here twiddling my thumbs while others are fighting for freedom at the cost of their own life!” Steve paused, his chest heaving, his face red. “Why can’t you just be happy for me?” He said at last, more calmly. “We’ve been friends since primary school, but I feel like I don’t understand you anymore.”

James recoiled at that, stunned. He wanted to tell him that he hadn’t enlisted, that he’d been drafted, but he didn’t dare imagine Steve’s reaction if he found out he’d lied on top of the rest. “I can’t see why,” he said, his mouth dry, “I’m just worried for you, Stevie.”

“But you can’t take care of me all your life, Buck, and you know that.” And now Steve’s tone was soft, almost gentle, pitying, and James hated it with a passion. “You’re shipping off today, and I need to take care of myself. If Doctor Erskine can make me a soldier, give me the ability to fight for what’s right, then I’ll take the chance.” He shrugged, grinned. “Who knows? Maybe we’ll end up in the same regiment.”

And his eyes were so open, so sincere, that James couldn’t find it in himself to argue any more. This was his last day, he didn’t want to spend the rest of his time with his best friend fighting over questionable life choices. Steve wouldn’t waver anyway, James knew him well enough to recognize
his stance. He’d made up his mind, and that was that. His shoulders slumped in defeat, and Steve set
a full plate in front of him.

“C’mon. You need to eat.”

“Yes, Ma. Ow! What was that for?”

“Eat your breakfast, Jim,” Steve mimicked, only for James to stick his tongue out.

“Very mature,” Antonia commented as she slipped into the kitchen, rubbing wet hair with a towel,
only to stop as Steve spun around and gasped. “You!”

The color drained from her face, eyes rounding in something disturbingly like fear. James stood,
concerned as she swayed in her spot, Steve inching forward at the same time, concern wrinkling his
forehead.

“Antonia?” She stumbled back. Her shoulder hit the doorframe, but she didn’t even seem to register
the pain, one hand clutching at her heart. Her breathing picked up, eyes wild as she stared blindly at
Steve, darting over to James when he moved without seeming to achieve staying on him. He reached
out, and finally—finally!—she looked at him, but there was no relief, no warmth or affection to be
seen, and James felt cold all over at the naked horror in the hazel orbs as she stared at him with
something like heartbeat. Her lips moved soundlessly, mouthing the same words over and over, a
strange mix of “Oh my God” and “no” over and over again.

“Antonia, are you—”

She scrambled away from his touch, looking panicked all of a sudden, and James froze, hand still
extended toward her.

“I—I—” she choked, backing away from them and to the door, reaching blindly for her coat and hat.
“I—James—I’m sorry, I—You need to understand—”

There were tears welling up in her eyes, and he remembered her as he found her the day before, tear
tracks on her cheeks, makeup smudged and chest still heaving with hiccupping sobs. She was
working herself into another panic attack, and he tried to calm her down, to keep his voice smooth
and even in spite of the growing dread twisting up his insides.

“You’re not making any sense, doll, you need to calm down. Breathe with me, c’mon, in and out, in
and—”

“No!” She was at the door now, one hand on the knob. “I can’t—”

“Dollface, you need to calm down—”

She straightened all at once, demeanor morphing so completely he almost took a step back, Steve
recoiling by his side. “Remember your promise, James,” she said, her eyes intent and dark and
burning with something like desperation.

In the mere second he and Steve froze up, she’d thrown the door open and disappeared down the
stairs, leaving them to stare at the open door.


She’d known, God, she’d known. She’d recognized him right away, how could she not have? His
face had been haunting her nightmares for years, although mostly faded in comparison to Rogers’, vivid and brutal in his angry self-righteousness, blue eyes burning brighter than the arc reactor he’d destroyed with her father’s shield. The ghost she’d fought her entire life to measure up to allying with that of her father’s fists to strike her down once and for all. She’d known, and yet she’d still approached him. A twisted desire to understand what made that man worth breaking a family and defying the will of 117 countries. She’d still offered comfort, and found herself charmed in spite of herself. And for a while, it had been fine. She’d thought she could do it. But seeing them together, standing side by side, facing her…

Her lungs burned. Why, for fuck’s sake, why had she gone and fallen for a dead man? Why had she fallen for the man who’d cost her everything? Who’d broken everything she’d bled to build?

People thought Toni Stark had no grasp on feelings whatsoever, that she was oblivious to the basics of human emotions, but the truth was that, to keep up the mask and not lose herself all these years, she’d had to be very honest with herself. She’d made it a rule not to lie to herself, and she still practiced it to this day. Her feelings for James may be new, but she could recognize them for what they were.

She wiped her eyes on her arm furiously. She’d cried enough yesterday, wouldn’t do it again. Toni Stark was not weak, she was the epitome of a strong woman, and she certainly didn’t break down upon realizing the man she was dating had at most two years to live.

Toni Stark was a fucked up bitch with shitty luck, trust issues the size of a skyscraper and a ledger dripping in so much red it made the Black Widow’s look pristine white in comparison. The people she loved were few and far between, but when she loved, she loved with all she was. So far, she’d been burned each and every time, and she’d tried, she’d believed that maybe, here in the forties, so far out of her time, she could, as Antonia, have a second chance. James had seen her for who she was, hadn’t expected anything else, and—

And he was dead. He would be dead. She’d fallen for the only member of the Howling Commandos to have died during the war, because the Winter Soldier, that shell of a man, that murderer, certainly wasn’t James.

She lashed out at the bag with a yell, kicking viciously at the same time, the tape she’d barely had the presence of mind to wrap around her knuckles hardly protecting her skin from repeated hits.

“Fuck!” She snarled. “Fuck, fuck, fuck! Damnit!” The bag swung mockingly from the ceiling, and she launched herself at it, unleashing her fury, her frustration and pain on it, wishing for it to feel it, to break like she was breaking—God, Howard must be rolling in his grave, and Rogers…

Rogers was tiny and frail, barely as tall as she was, and had no idea who she was. To him, she was his friend’s, Bucky Barnes’ dame, and he had no idea that Bucky Barnes was going to die and she’d made him promise—

“How?” She yelled at the top of her lungs. The empty gym’s walls absorbed her rage, white and unflinching, and her vision blurred again. “Fuck!” She lashed out again, blindly, the bone-deep exhaustion she’d felt before coming back with a vengeance. The blow glanced off the bag, and she overbalanced, fell flat on her face, hands barely coming up in time to keep from breaking her nose. She lay there, cheek pressed to the cool wood, and closed her eyes, breathing deep and slow, centering herself. She could do this. She’d survived much worse than a little heartbreak. She’d had a hole sawed into her chest, been water-boarded and raped for three months only to make an escape in blood, wit and fire. She’d had her heart ripped out of her chest by her father figure and been told, over and over again, that she wasn’t enough. She could take it. She could do it. She just needed to protect herself.
And wasn’t she glad now, that she’d pushed him away and run? He was leaving today, and she
would stay here, so...problem solved.

Right?

She was in the middle of training the recruits when the time came. She let her eyes fall shut for a
moment, tracing the contours of his face as it had been this morning, brown hair a mess and pale blue
eyes warm as he looked at her. She pictured him, standing on the platform, an officer among other
soldiers, his duffle at his feet as he said goodbye to Steve. She imagined herself at his side, pressing a
goodbye kiss to his lips and watching him go, climb onto the train. She imagined the screeching of
the wheels, the sharp hiss of steam as the train set off, the way he would be waving with his free
hand, hanging from the handle on the soot-blackened outer step.

“Ma’am?”

Her eyes snapped open. The recruit recoiled, and she wondered what she looked like at this moment,
but schooling her face was an art she’d mastered at the age of seven, and there was nothing to be
seen when she started barking orders again.

Goodbye, James.

End Notes

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