The Midnight Engineer
by ThatDamnKennedyKid

Summary

"I didn't know any of that." Pepper pursed her lips, looking away. "She used to wake up screaming, but I didn't think . . . I had no idea she'd . . . I don't know what to say."
"Notoriety in the intelligence community is far from unheard of." Clint [Clint Barton "Hawkeye", Agent of SHIELD, Avengers Member] recrossed his legs, one hand on the chair armrest and the other on his knee. He looked vague, as if detached from the information he was sharing. "But even in the most prevalent and scary cases, there's a face someone's put to a name, a title. This one, though, this one was a little different.

"The Winter Soldier was the biggest threat to the spy community." She [Natasha Romanov "Black Widow", Agent of SHIELD, Avengers Member] looked on, as if reporting a mission. "We knew of him vaguely, but we never knew where he'd be or what his motives were. He killed everyone he ever met and was the last ghost you wanted to meet. The Midnight Engineer, on the other hand, was like tiptoeing around trying to avoid the gaze of a wrathful god."

"What makes you say that?"

"The Engineer seemed omnipotent." She replied, squaring her shoulders. "Triple secured information suddenly winds up in an unsecured email and leaks worldwide. Government secrets that didn't have the ink for TOP SECRET dry on their pages yet were divulged. It seemed like they knew everything, and that's largely because they did."

"Why did you assume this was one person and not a network of corruption?"

"We were the corruption." Natasha explained. "Spies are there specifically to prey on system weaknesses. We work out the little kinks in people to get them to tell us things that we otherwise wouldn't have known. The Engineer was sixty steps ahead and above all else, never had a face."

"And yet you knew it was one person?"

"The methods were the same, the intelligence obviously immense. Every person has a pattern and the Engineer was no different, but there was never anything left to trace them, to signs of security cracks in electronic databases." She huffed a breath. "It was like they were water, slipping through everything they thought to look into."

"How did you find them?"

"We didn't. She came to us."

"From what I understand, Antonia Stark was kidnapped when she was thirteen, correct?" He [Bruce Banner "Hulk", PhD of Nuclear Physics, Avengers Member] murmured, nervously looking around. "And then she reappeared when she was twenty-two, shortly before her parents were killed. Then she took over the company with Obadiah Stane at her back, helping her."

"Honestly, after Howard and Maria died, Tony disappeared for a bit." He [James Rhodes "War Machine", Colonel of the U.S. Army] said, shrugging. "I knew Tony from MIT and once she came back, we hooked back up. She had no particular love for her parents, but I imagined the actual loss weighed heavily on her. It wasn't long enough to get worried - just under a week, I think - and then"
she took about six months to integrate herself in as CEO. By then, her public and personal image was made out of stone. Not even I could tell what she was thinking and she was never really one to share her thoughts.

"Did she ever cry?" She [Pepper Potts, CEO of Stark Industries] cocked her head. "I only ever seen her break down once. I had gotten the task of telling her that her butler, Jarvis, had passed away in the night. When she hit the tarmac in Miami, I was the one who had to tell her. She had me take her to his hospital and when she seen him, she collapsed. I mean, I don't blame her. Two years after her parents, now the last vestige of her family passes away? I would be heartbroken too. The way she cried over him, though, really made me think he meant more to her than her parents did."

"What did she do after his passing?"

"She locked herself in the basement robotics lab she had in her house." She replied. "She came out a month and a half later - well, I found her asleep in her room a month and a half later with an AI running amok."

"What do you mean?"

"She's built an artificial intelligence and wired it though every computer in her house. Then it told me its name was JARVIS."

"Did you confront her on it?"

"How do you do something like that?" Pepper shook her head. "Tony only ever showed something wasn't right when it came unexpectedly. I . . . When Tony woke up that afternoon, she just looked so much better than she had at the funeral and I didn't want to spoil it. I didn't want to make it any harder on her than it already was."

"Already?"

"I spent every day of my life glued to Tony's side. Of course I would notice that something about her wasn't right. I couldn't tell if it was just her eccentric genius or something else. But you know the one thing I never thought to ask her? I never asked her what happened the years she was gone. I wonder if I could have done something . . . If I could have helped had I simply offered. But once the cops got done with her and she was the CEO, I can't for the life of me think why any of us thought she was fine."

The place smelled like a basement sewer - old, rotting metal and the strong aroma of stagnant water and creeping mold. She could almost taste the spores and feel them take root in her lungs. Her head was pounding, but she supposed after taking a hit like that, it was probably just lucky she was alive. Most people would have more problems than a headache. She knew, however, that her problems wouldn't end when the headache went away. There would only be two reasons that someone would want her: to hurt Howard or to use her. Maybe even both at the same time. Probably both. Howard didn't have many friends outside of his business dealings.

Dragged through what was obviously an old bunker in the middle of somewhere cold, the blindfold was ripped off her head and she was unceremoniously thrown into a room with a meager mattress, a thin pillow and a sheet. She ached and the only thing she wanted was a hug from Jarvis.

If she thought trying to sleep to the sound of soldier patrols was bad, what followed in the next year was much, much worse.
She kept punching even after the other woman stopped moving, until the blood from her knuckles started mixing with more than the blood of the other woman's nose.

"Very good." The voice of her instructor praised, his Russian thick with his accent. It had taken more than a few beatings to learn to understand him. "You may yet have potential."

She stopped punching and lowered her head - not ducking it, as was a sign of weakness, but lowering in submission - with her fists falling loose at her sides.

"It appears that you've passed well enough to get a reward, Antonia."

"My loyalty is it's own reward."

"Good girl." He purred. "You not be subjected to the water tonight. Instead, you will go to Koslovich and learn of your new assigned post, do you understand?"

Throat closing, chest heaving, completely restrained, locked in place with nowhere for the air to go but out and nowhere for the water to go but in-

She lowered her head some more in gratitude.

"Now leave before I think better of it."

She stood with graceful purpose - show no weakness and you will receive more mercy - and left the room, pacing evenly to the door behind which stood Colonel Koslovich. No weakness, no weakness, only blankness and an even gait. Don't flinch when you sit, he'll notice-

"Antonia. Sit."

She did as she was told and stared straight ahead, eyes locked unseeingly on the golden knife cased on the back desk.

"You've progressed well."

"Hail HYDRA."

"Better than I expected, even. Tell me, do you know what you're being trained for?"

"No sir."

"You will be our intellect, Antonia. So much was lost after the war and now we have the chance to make it up from the shadows. You will be the brain behind that next step, just like Doctor Zola was. How about that, hmm?"

"So long as I may serve, sir."

"So rapid a learner." His touch felt like used grease on her skin and his laugh was like she was getting a sponge bath with steel wool and sandpaper. Don't flinch, don't blink, don't acknowledge the feeling lest he notice and then- "I'm going to introduce you to your assignment, Antonia."

"Hail HYDRA."
It was hard to think after so long in hell, but she managed. Past all the searing pain in her body from the shock torture, the bruising from the last beating she’d had and the remnants of the poison training she’d been doing, she managed to think enough to do her task.

The lab was meager at best - just an old set of Cold War tools and some places to rest things with piles of metal and a forge (of all things) sitting in a corner of the room.

"Work quickly." Was the curt command as the blast door slammed shut. The guards were outside, she knew, but at least they weren’t inside. They would only be in the way and her charge was too well trained to do anything to her (according to them, anyway - she wasn’t exactly sold on the prospect). Still watched, still monitored, still tracked, no time to let down her guard. Have to keep thinking, keep planning, keep moving, keep doing.

"Hail HYDRA." She replied, back turned to him as she surveyed the tools, what she had to prove herself with. Not much, never much, but she’d done more with less. She turned around and faced the man in black standing at the doorway, blankly looking forward as if he didn’t know who he was, why he was here, if he was alive. The guard who’s walked the man in was gone, so she walked over to him. "And you are?"

"Winter Soldier."

The name shot chills up her back, but she didn’t let it show. Couldn’t let them know that she knew who he was. "Do you have anything else I can call you?"

He mutely shook his head. She nodded.

"Come over here, then. I need you to sit down so I can look at your arm and actually understand what repairs I'm supposed to be making."

He did as she said without a flicker of recognition in his eyes. He was eerie, but she said nothing and got down to business.

He looked even worse than usual.

"What the hell do they keep doing to you?" She murmured. She’d learned well from working with the Soldier over the last few months that he didn’t speak very much, only occasionally murmuring out a response if asked a direct question with established eye-contact. What they did to her must pale in comparison to what they did to delete the man that must have once inhabited this body. He was usually tense when they brought him in, but she found that her little mutterings and humming as she worked on him calmed him, soothed him somehow and made him easier to work on. "It looks like frost damage - the metal getting brittle from thawing too quickly from deep freeze - and I get that it's cold wherever this is - Siberia, if I had to take a guess - but this is a stupid amount of damage."

"Cryo."

Her gaze snapped up to his and her screwdriver froze. "Pardon?"

He looked down at the arm. "Cryo does it."

"They-" She blinked, taking in a breath. "They freeze you?"

He nodded, just a little, but there was a sparkle of something there and that growing feeling of I
know him continued to expand inside her head.

"It's okay." She whispered, glancing back at the door to make sure she wasn't being watched and stroked his cheek. He jolted a little, like he wasn't expecting it, but slowly leaned back in and pressed his cheek into her hand. His eyes slipped closed and he breathed out against her palm, slumping down in the chair. "I'll take care of you."

"Don't get in trouble." He whispered.

She let herself smirk. "Never."

"The Midnight Engineer was HYDRA's answer to SHIELD." Clint said, fingers tapping on the chair's arm. "Their answer to Howard Stark. She was how they circumvented having to make arms deals, to come out into the spotlight as a credible threat to the world. I'd say it worked because we only found out about them after they'd been taken down."

"To put this in perspective," Natasha said, reclining in her chair, "I was part of a subdivision of HYDRA for a long time. I was trained in their Red Room, handed over to the KGB and worked for them for a long time. I heard about the exploits of the Winter Soldier there first, but his name was like a shadow. Then the Midnight Engineer appeared too. Whispers said it was a she, a genius technician and hacker. The Engineer was our information highway and became the rumoured source of weapons we'd never had before. Much of my current arsenal is made up of things that were crafted for me by the Engineer when I became the Black Widow."

"The details of what the Engineer did and who they were are still sketchy to SHIELD." Clint said. "It was confirmed that the Midnight Engineer was in fact the Winter Soldier's handler and was responsible for the care and maintenance of him. They were the primary source of information for the organization and worked behind the scenes to help better HYDRA in as many ways as possible."

"We found out after the fact that the main base holding the Soldier and Engineer had been in Siberia. However, when we got there, there was nothing concrete left that could have helped us identify who either shadow was." Natasha adjusted her hair. "Whoever covered for them did it well. There was nothing worth exploring found there. Only scraps of metal and wires."

She was standing in the back of the room, just like they told her to, and she forcefully kept her face straight as they strapped him down into that chair. His screams echoed in her head as they passed from his lips between the rubber of the bite guard. She wanted to vomit. She could taste it in the back of her throat, but she could not. They would sense it then, the weakness she had for him, that she hid just so that if there had to be someone to work with him, it would be her. There was no one else in this shithole that cared about them, even as unconsciously as their own connection.

"Once he is wiped, you must prepare him for cryosleep." Brock Rumlow said, looking away with pain in his eyes, barely contained restraint. She didn't blink, didn't switch her gaze from his
screaming, writhing form.

"Hail HYDRA." She replied, wondering in the back of her head how he had made it this far with so much humanity left showing. HYDRA was no place for humans. To see something like this and be able to not flinch, to not feel sympathy was the kind of monstrosity that HYDRA demanded - the kind she so evidently displayed.

Rumlow nodded, leaving before he apparently either cried or threw up; weakness, meekness of the soul, of his faith, loyalty. HYDRA would get him killed and she almost felt bad. Had she not known that he chose such a life - unlike her and him - she might feel something more than faint recognition of him.

It took hours for the wipe to finish and she was the last one left in the room when it was over.

Every time he came to and went under, she was there. He knew her. Not like the other faces, he knew her like he knew the old blonde man, Pierce. He knew her and she was supposed to be there when he came to and went under.

This was not her.

All unknown faces were all enemies and he had reacted accordingly, reaching up and snapping the neck of the young man hovering over him with a dangerous glint in his eye - looking at an animal, not a man - and stood up, ignoring the guns and scanning for her.

"Down, boy."

Her voice. He sat back down, waiting. She appeared from between the soldiers, ignoring the Pierce man behind her who was scowling. She walked up to him, standing just out of reach. She didn't do that normally - she liked being touched and she touched him constantly. He - he remembered how she would stroke his hair, cut it when it got too long, trim him facial hair and hold him through the bouts of frozen stillness that came with waking from cryo.

It was in her eyes - an audience, no evidence. She would give it to him later, in her lab, where she would get rid of the rusted feeling in the response of his arm. She was safe and she would take care of him.

"He listens to you all of a sudden?" Pierce asked, polite voice hiding the scathing tone.

"I'm his handler, sir." She replied, unhooking the last of the braces and pulling him up by the metal arm, checking it out as if it was her priority and not the frostbite that usually developed around the join of metal and flesh, not caring for him over the weaponry he was. "I would think it is natural that he comes to remember me since I am with him so much. When he is not deployed or in sleep, he is being serviced by me."

Pierce looked at her in an odd, calculating manner. "The briefing will be in the lab. Have him ready by midnight."

"Of course, sir. Hail HYDRA." She wiggled her fingers at him and he followed her out of the room, down four different halls and into the room she kept.

The next time he seen her, she didn't smile. She did what she had to do, took care of him and fixed
his arm, changed it a little bit at a time with the spare material she had, trying to make it lighter, stronger. Despite all the killing he was used for, he knew she couldn’t help but want him to return and in the most whole piece possible.

Before she let him out to be taken by his insertion team, she gently touched his cheek. "I need you to do something for me."

He nodded. He would do anything for her. She took care of him.

She lifted her shirt, pointing to a spot on her stomach. "I need you to punch me very hard right here."

He hesitated - she was safe so in return he hurt her? - but she tapped his cheekbone.

"I know what I’m saying. I need you to do it to help me, okay?"

So he did. He hated the way the breath rushed out of her, the little whimper that escaped her.

"Again."

He did. The metal dug into her skin and he could see the imprint of his fist, where she would bruise.

"Again."

He did. The way she slumped over him made the cold clarity in his head retreat and hot guilt sweep in though his mind.

"Go. Go to your mission."

He only went because she told him to. He wanted to stay.

She was the same as always when he returned, covered in blood. She didn't flinch, wasn't ginger with her movements, but when she reached up to get her soldiering iron, he seen the blood-soaked bandages wrapped around her waist, the blood pooled around where he had punched her.

"I think I finally found out who you are."

"Who I . . . am?"

"Yeah. You know, like I'm Tony. I think I know who you are."

"Who?"

"Ever heard of a James Barnes?"

"Tony's return was really strange." Rhodes shook his head. "Howard had a tower in New York, a work building where he developed his R&D. He was there the day that Tony walked in in street clothes. If it hadn't have been for Jarvis going to run an errand, it's pretty likely that we wouldn't even have known she was still alive. We'd believed she was dead for years."
"From what I understand about Tony's return, no one seemed to ask a lot of questions." Bruce nervously adjusted his glasses. "Her father and mother were too overjoyed to bring up painful memories and when the authorities tried to get anything out of her, her eyes glazed over. She was diagnosed with PTSD and they recommended a therapist before leaving it at that. There isn't even a police report, just a withdrawal of her Missing Persons."

"That was one of the first things I asked her after I got hired and became closer with her." Pepper admitted. "She only smiled at me and told me that it was better that I didn't know. I listened for years, seeing if she would let something slip to JARVIS or Dum-E or Buttrfingrz or even U, but she never did. She never said anything to anybody. I didn't push it at the time - I was her personal assistant, not her mother - but I wonder if things would have been different now, had I have. Would she be more stable now? Would it have made it worse? I guess I don't know whether I was right to keep my mouth shut on the subject."

"Stark was uncooperative." Clint explained. "Of course, of the first things that Howard did was have SHIELD debrief her. She would not answer questions and she seemed to have trigger phrases that would make her go still and her face go blank."

"The only valuable thing we learned was that she had apparently adopted Russian and Ukrainian since her capture." Natasha supplied. "Obviously, that lead us to the KGB, but the Kremlin flat out denied it and when I dug with some of my contacts, they couldn't dig up any directives for me either. On top of that, Russia really had no reason to capture Stark's daughter. Howard was not involved heavily in the Cold War and his military contract with the States was a long-standing one. There was no reason to make an enemy of Stark and nothing to gain from holding her. The lead went cold and we only got more confused."

"Don't get me wrong, Tony spoke. She didn't stop speaking." Clint rolled his shoulders. "She just didn't talk about her captors, what she did when she was in their hands (under duress or otherwise), where she learned her new languages, what country she was being held in. She didn't even give up the names of her captors. She just muttered a specific series of words to herself whenever they probed and stared talking about nothing. At the time, we thought it might be the PTSD kicking in or maybe Stockholm, so we left Howard with that diagnosis. The only thing to do from there was to let her integrate back into her previous life and see if over time she would divulge information."

"Then Howard and Maria were killed." Rhodes flinched, sighing. "And then what? There was no one around. Even if she woke up screaming all the answers we wanted to know, there was no one there to hear it. JARVIS was her AI and without her permissions, he would never let her secrets go. Not to mention that his mainframe is literally impossible to hack. Whatever she was left to suffer, she did so alone and in silence. Howard instilled it in her early, to keep her mouth shut and her face straight and whatever happened to her had only made her poker face immaculate."
She didn't think she'd miss Howard and Maria when they were gone. A year and a half in their company after ten years of forgetting that she had people who knew her name outside that shitty base had done damage to her psyche that HYDRA could only dream of. The conflicting desire to at once bare her soul and run as far as possible was crippling. The guilt and conflict had torn her apart - she had known HYDRA's plans, that they were doomed from the moment she walked into SI's R&D and Jarvis recognized her. They had been gentle and caring and then Rhodey had come-

She had been taken to a base in Washington. The video of her Soldier breaking Howard's face then squeezing the life out of Maria had played on loop while they 'reconditioned' her. In and out of the water, gasping for the brief pockets of air that came when she was allowed to break surface. A week they did this until she stopped shaking in fear, stopped resisting and started to crave the feeling of the water in her lungs because it meant she was closer to death.

Then they had returned her with her only directive being Take over the company.

Virginia Potts.

She looked at the woman over the large oak desk. The ginger stared right back at her, obviously nervous about the chances of her success in such an interview, but undaunted by Tony's authority and status not only within the company, but also the princess of business that she was. She slid a paper across the desk, not breaking eye contact as she gave her best heartbreaker smirk.

"Sign on the dotted line and I get to call you Pepper for the time you work for me."

The ginger had blinked, surprised, but smirked in kind and took the pen with the misleading dainty grip of a ruthless intellect.

The boozing and sleeping around was the easy part. It was easy to keep up such a sleazy appearance, even when Pepper and Rhodey would give her disapproving looks. She could handle their disappointment in her, could bear their concern and get rid of it. The game was worth the deception and the pain. She had to play it well and smart and if she was successful - when she was successful - she would bring HYDRA down with her and set everyone else free without anyone knowing. No one would feel even the faintest trace of fear - she would save them, she would save him.

He would come, deep and late in the night, standing over her bed. He was supposed to be a message, that they were watching and their best weapon, her charge, was now tasked on her. The first time she hugged him, when his arms wrapped around her and they just stood there, finally allowed contact they had been yearning for for years, she knew she'd reached her first goal.

"I've missed you." He admitted, clutching her tightly, just breathing her in. "The smell of your hair, the tenderness of your touch, the care of your hands, the way your smile."

"I think I've missed you more." The haunting images of him beating the life out of her father was dimmed by the way he smiled at her, the chill of the metal fingers against her cheek as he cupped her face. "How long do you have?"

"You're supposed to repair my arm. It's sparking since my last mission. They don't know what's wrong." Their breaths mingled. "I have as long as it will take for you to fix it. Best bet, twelve
hours."

Her fingertips ran down his neck and he shivered. "I think I can make that work. Can you?"

He smashed her into the wall, but the throb of her back was forgotten in the rush and desperation of the way he kissed her, holding her up with his flesh arm and losing his metal hand in the newly lengthy brunette tresses.

"You're mine, Tony."

She kissed up his neck, biting his throat just to hear the rumble from his chest. "They'd have to kill me to take me from your side."

"And all those rumours?"

She pulled back, meeting his burning black gaze. "Our bodies are weapons, baby, and used accordingly. But I've got your heart and you've got mine. No one can take that from either of us, no matter what control they wrestle over our bodies and what they're used for."

He pulled her back from the wall and dropped them onto the bed, taking a moment to enjoy the vision of her splayed out below him. "Does that make this nothing? I don't want it to be nothing."

"This means something because it's you and me. When we're apart, it means nothing. I . . . My heart is loyal to you, Bucky. No one else, not even me."

Between his hands and hers, her flimsy shirt and his tactical gear found the floor and they ran out the clock. The Soldier came back fixed, sparking nowhere but his eyes.

"He'll move soon."

Her fingers danced over the scarring on his shoulder. "I'm sure he will. He's been biding his time and I keep pushing him out."

"You're antagonizing him on purpose?"

"What good is an enemy you can't lock eyes with over a table?"

He pressed his nose to her hair, inhaling the expensive perfume, the luxurious shampoo and conditioner lingering there. Her skin against his was the best sensation he knew, second only to the feeling of her eyelashes against his cheekbones when they kissed. "Don't put yourself in danger."

"I will when you do."

"For a long time, everything was normal." Pepper chuckled a little. "Normal around Tony, that is. Then . . . Then Obadiah Stane got greedy."

"He came out of nowhere with his move. We weren't expecting interference in Afghanistan when
she did the demonstration of the Jericho." Rhodes shook his head. "I mean, hell, I didn't even know that something was up. Neither did Pepper or Happy, her driver. I realize now that she knew all along that he would move against her - it was in the way that she smiled at me when we found her in the desert."

"It just seemed like one problem after another. First, Obadiah, then the Whiplash character, and then Loki . . ." Pepper sighed. "It was like she set off a chain reaction and from there, the world exploded."

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The felt numb when Yinsen told her about the battery. All she could consider is So this is what he feels like all the time. She thought of him constantly, wondering if he would come looking for her, if HYDRA would bother to save her once they found out an asset was missing. For once, she wasn't sure what they would do. They might come looking for her, or they might consider this an efficient way to be rid of her and the loose ends she presented. On the other hand, Obadiah was led by nothing but greed and they could not approach him the way they got their other backers - Stane thrived off conflict and had no devotion outside of his insatiable lust for money and power. HYDRA would have no sway with him, so perhaps they would be looking to make sure she was returned to her throne. Who knows, Stane might even just meet a 'tragic accident' with a metal arm.

She's not too proud to admit that she almost gave up in that cave. One fucking disaster after the next and she was done suffering for it all, paying for the sins of others and bending to another's will. It felt like a need deep in her stomach, pulsing in time with the electromagnet lodged in her sternum.

Yinsen was what made her persevere. His quiet confidence in her intelligence, that she would be able to think of something, could do something, pushed her onward. She would go so far as to say that she loved Yinsen because he became a part of her soul when she found him dying, when she watched his last breath leave him. Three long months spent solely in his company only to find out in the very last moment that he had given her those months, lived not because he wanted to, but because there was someone by him worth living for.

She couldn’t see Pepper, Rhodey, Happy, Bucky made to suffer. Not more than they already were.

She turned on the flame throwers and jettisoned away from the cave, wandering the desert for two days before Rhodey's helicopters flew overhead and she fell into the embrace of her best friend.

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He was sent to her two weeks after her return.

"They looked." He whispered against her shoulder, panting for breath after their kiss had stolen it. "They searched for you, but you were nowhere to be found. I would have come. They were going to send me as soon as they knew where you were."

"Don't make me feel sentimental for HYDRA." She ran her fingers through his hair, capturing his attention. "Hold me right now."

They traced each other's scars, cold versus fresh, and touched until their hearts were convinced that they couldn't feel pain.
He was there two days after she killed Stane. She woke up to his slightly blank face stroking her hair.

"Did you get wiped?"

He nodded mutely, as he often was after a wipe. She patted the bed beside her and he crawled in, wrapping himself around her until the stillness in his hands became trembling, then settled down properly.

"You're dying, aren't you?"

She dropped her shirt, covering the marks. "It's just the palladium discharge. I'll be fine-"

"Don't let it get to the point that you're beyond help." He stroked over the blue-glowing machine, eyes lowered. "I can't save you from this."

"I know, I really do. I'm just trying to figure out what to do."

"Don't wait too long." He pleaded, capturing her lips in a kiss. He always left her breathless and since she got the Reactor, his presence made the thing ache in the sweetest way.

"I won't. I promise."

She didn't anticipate Ivan. Some idiot her father had once worked with had managed to hold an erection through the vodka swirling through his body long enough to produce a child he ruined and that child had come after her, looking for an unjust vengeance.

He was stupid to believe that he could out think her, could work around her. In the end, he seemed to know that he couldn't, admitted it as he lay on the ground inside of a bomb. She was not sad to see him die. She saved Pepper and Rhody got out alive. Not to mention how satisfying it was when she blew kisses at Hammer as he was getting pushed into the back of a police car.

Seven billion nerves in the human body and some people managed to get on all of them.

No one acknowledged that through a feat of science and engineering unlike anything else in the world, she'd saved her own life again. Natalia- tasha, whatever, didn't say anything about it and she actually appreciated that spies were known for keeping their mouths shut. Maybe, in another circumstance, they would even have been allies, maybe even friends.

If nothing else was to be learned here, she was now certain that she had chose friends wisely. Maybe one day, once it was over and if she didn't have to follow them to their grave, she might tell them. Who knows?

"They know that you're going to SHIELD. They want information."

"I know. They'll have it, not that they need my help with that anymore."

"Fury's scheming and none of them can read him, you know that." He nuzzled into her neck. God,
he loved breathing her in. She smelled so much like coconut now and he wasn't really sure why but he liked it. "They want a read on him and you're the best one to get that."

"I'll do what I can, but let them know that I'll be reporting after Loki's dealt with. This goes above our politics."

"I will. They might come for you."

"Let them. I'll tell them to their face. They can't take me too long or else people will get suspicious and I become a precarious gamble."

"I understand."

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Turns out that she had no ability to deal with the Chitauri. She had nightmare after nightmare about them, to the point where she couldn't sleep. She didn't sleep. She worked and worked and worked, sifting through all that she got about Phase II and tactically offering her help to SHIELD for Project Insight. She gave them the repulsor tech which would make them more efficient, just as HYDRA said. The Project was coming along swimmingly.

Then they involved the Soldier.

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"I met Lady Stark firstly in battle." He [Thor Odinson, Prince of Asgard, God of Thunder, Avengers Member] said, smiling. "She's a worthy and valiant soul. I would think her the Midgardian equal to my brother, able to weave her intelligence into every crevasse and crack of her world. Were she a sorceress, she could rule all of Yggdrasil. She has become a very dear friend to me."

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"I didn't exactly start out on the right foot with Tony." He [Steven Grant Rogers "Captain America", WWII Veteran, Avengers Member] admitted sheepishly. "I made more than a couple fast and loose assumptions about her that I didn't make with the other members. I'd like to think that we've mended our relationship."

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"It was always obvious that her face was false, I think." Thor ruminated. "She was too good, too easy in a way that means she faked it into her nature. She was always thinking, always working on something even when she was doing nothing. There was always more to her than there appeared. She reminds me very much of my brother. Something behind her eyes followed her. I thought everyone knew. I suppose I was wrong to assume."

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"Tony seemed self-centred and empty to me." Steve looked down when he said it. "She didn't seem to take anything seriously and it made me angry. It took me too long to realize that she was like that superficially. It took her flying a nuke into space for me to grasp that. Even beyond that, it took the end of SHIELD and an international assassination for me to realize that behind the suit was a person I knew nothing about."
"The compartmentalization of SHIELD means that I didn't know why we needed the information, just that I had to get it." Natasha said. "I knew about Insight, obviously. It was somewhat of an open secret at SHIELD. I knew about Tony's involvement with the repulsors replacing the turbines. I knew she had something to do with its programming and the satellite that was launched ahead of time to coordinate the helicarriers. After Loki, she was more readily willing to offer her assistance to SHIELD. We thought it was because of her near-death experiences."

"It was too easy from the beginning." Clint laughed. "There was no way that someone like Tony would offer to help after the organization she's helping launched a nuke at her. I mean, if I were in her place, I wouldn't have helped us. What the fuck for? So we can get a whole bunch more people killed in our janky-ass system? Nah. There was something up and we should have known it then."

She had left the bug in Fury's ear and all that was left was for him to look into the Lumeria Star. He would send Widow and Cap, she knew. Window owuld get the information about Insight and HYDRA would reveal itself inside SHIELD. After that, they would be lead to Zola and Cap could have his little revelation.

She shook hands with Maria Hill. "You might want to take these, too. Boards like these are fragile and having a manual override is a much better option than giving the machine a chance to go rogue."

"I would think you have better faith in your work." Hill eyed her coldly, but accepted the box.

She shrugged. "Even I have manual emergency functions on the suits. If you don't use them, all the better. By the way, tell Natasha that I have some gadgets for her and Clint."

She left the building, walking past Rumlow without so much as a glance in his direction.

They had involved the Soldier.

They had involved her Soldier.

How dare they?

Pierce. It must be Pierce.

Oh, she would make him suffer.

She had her servers ready, the descriptions poised on the edge of collapse. All Cap had to do was get Nick in there to use his secondary code and Natasha would be given the entirety of their secrets to dump. Even if they tried to save the secrets, she was watching and she would expose them all. She would lay them bare. They would writhe and burn in the face of the sun.

Merchant of Death, right?

It was time to collect their debt to her.
She hated Killian.

Not as much as Bucky did, trapped like a wild animal in her arms when he finally reappeared.

"I should have been there. It's my job to defend you." He snarled.

"No, it's not." She replied, voice biting and fierce. "I didn't protect you."

He pressed his face into her Reactor, shaking with rage. "I want to kill him."

"Too late, Pepper already did. Pretty dead too."

"I have to leave. Soon. You'll be roasted alive if they find me here."

"Buck, wait-"

He pressed a searing promise of a kiss to her lips. "I have to. I have to."

"At least not right now." She locked her arms around his shoulders. There must have been some honesty in her eyes because he paused. "At least, not tonight."

"Ultron?" Clint whistled. "Now, there was a mess." He laughed a little, the sound hollow.

"Hindsight it always twenty-twenty, so saying now that building a world-protecting robot was probably a bad idea is redundant. It didn't make sense why she thought something so faceless, lead by the ever-impartial JARVIS, would be the best option at the time. We didn't fully grasp the depth of her PTSD, the way her missing years warped her and her thoughts. She never admitted what happened or how she got out of Afghanistan."

"Tony wears all the blame for Ultron and it's not fair." Bruce's eyebrows knitted together and he frowned deeply. "I was directly involved and so was Hellen Cho. We're as much to blame as Tony for all that happened, but she took it all on herself and made herself the figurehead of the disaster. I did and still do feel terrible for letting her. I should have done more."

"She used to shake." Thor said, hands resting together on his lap. "Her hands would get a fine tremble. You could tell because she would put down her coffee and not come back to it for a couple of hours. She would submerse herself in physically demanding work that didn't necessary require the steadiest hand. And when it stopped, she would immediately get up and go back to her cold coffee, drinking it all back. I never wanted her to be aware that I noticed her moments because she obviously took great pains to cover them. A cornered friend will never seek help - I thought it best to let her do so on her own and I stand by that decision now. It is, after all, what brought us here."

"I would find her passed out at her desk in the lab." Steve sighed. "Sometimes, she would be on the bar in the kitchen. You could see the dark circles around her eyes underneath the makeup, the way she lay in absolutely stillness, like she'd stopped breathing. More often than not, she was like this. Three, four days without sleep and some days where she would vanish. JARVIS would say that she
had gone out and when we checked the Tower and her bedroom, she wasn't anywhere to be found."

"I don't know Tony at all." He [Sam Wilson "Falcon", Afghanistan Veteran, Avengers Member] said, face straight. "I made my judgements based on how they affected me and how I saw them going down. Tony had little or nothing to do with the Avengers complex and I never seen much of her after the recruitment of Vision and Wanda. She gave us the complex and walked away. She was obviously still Iron Man, still did her thing and fought with us sometimes, but otherwise we saw nothing of her. Then this whole thing with the Sokovia Accords started and she became our enemy."

"Tony pushed the Accords as a way of being held responsible for Ultron." Bruce rubbed his face. "That was her penance. She thought that if we all stood under one banner, one representing the world, that we could be contained and leashed should we choose to do the wrong thing. She wanted a fallback plan, to have forces and named there to help us if something went wrong. She spent nights memorizing the names of the people who died in that town and I think she just wanted them to have some peace, for them to feel that such a chaotic force like the Avengers was answering to somebody and not just letting people die because they could."

"She pushed the Accords so hard - I don't know whether I'm to blame for thinking she had an ulterior motive or not. I really thought she did, that there was something she wanted from all this. And I- I couldn't trust something so big after SHIELD. I just couldn't. I thought she would understand that. I thought she would agree with me that there was nothing inherently righteous about another body with an agenda to push. I wouldn't be part of that and for someone who spoke so highly of independence, she sure seemed ready to bend over real quick to them. I didn't know what she was planning, just that it was something. And then . . . Well, the meeting in Vienna happened and Bucky got involved."

She watched the footage over and over again.

The body wasn't right - his shoulders were too narrow and his forehead wasn't wide enough. His hair didn't have the little bit of wave near the ends and the thighs were too small. She knew her Soldier backwards and forwards, inside and out - she had been the one to fix him and she knew the kind of physical fitness that his body demanded and how he looked. She knew him and whoever that man was, he wasn't him.

That's why she didn't say anything when Steve left. She was awake - she watched him take her motorcycle and drive off into the night, got the notification when he used her credit card for a flight to Bucharest. She didn't make a mention of it once, only told Rhodey she thought they were gone once she knew that Steve would have had the time to save Bucky from death. Rhodey's presence would null the kill order, which meant she could focus on the political game she was currently embroiled in. With any luck, all of those favours she had would keep her boys from Brooklyn out of prison and simply under "investigation". She knew where that would put Bucky, the kind of corner she was trapping him in, but she had all her bets on her ability to withhold the tide of politicians, generals, treaties and warhawks. It hadn't failed her thus far, but she certainly
needed to play much smarter now. She couldn't let them get a hold of who she really was. All these faceless assholes wanted to bring her down, but she couldn't mess up. Not now, not ever. Like every game she played, she would win, even if she had to play dirty to do so.

That picture wasn't her Soldier and now that it was public knowledge, she would have to find out who was trying to set him up and kill them before they killed him first.

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Out went the power.

The agents not scrambling amongst themselves were watching her abruptly turn and run. The questions were on the tip of their tongues: how did you know where he was located? Do you know what's happening? Are you involved?

Her boots had a thick heel to them that helped her run better than her stilettos would have and she was grateful for her foresight. Her black skinny jeans were flexible, better for flexibility than slacks and less likely to rip, less likely to catch.

She made it to the door before Steve, but he wasn't too far behind. She had to get in first.

The door wrenched itself open at her command, the little power pack attached to her Arc Reactor gave it enough juice to open itself up with her override (which she had broken in and placed there a month and a half ago, thinking that if Steve did something stupid, this is where he would be taken for questioning). She heard the man, she heard the words and she squeezed herself in just in time for Cap to come barrelling down the stairs. There wouldn't be enough room in the gap for him to fit, but she didn't need him.

"...Furnace...One..."

Bucky's agonized yell reached her first, followed by the squeal of ripping metal and he tore his arms loose of the flimsy restraints. The false therapist circled the cage, but didn't seem to have noticed her entrance.

"Stark! Don't go in alone! Open the door!"

The man's head snapped up and he locked gazes with her just in time to take a punch right to the face, her fist encased in metal (her watch, to be exact - she was pretty proud of this one, actually). It was enough to make him stop talking, to break the timed pauses between words and break the sequence. She ran at him again, surprising him with the way she snaked her body around his. No kind of military training would ever compare to the techniques of the Red Room and she was taking a little too much joy in teaching that to him.

"Longing..." She said, smashing her elbow down into the man's head, dazing him. "...Rusted...Seventeen..."

"I'll fight for you." He said, voice almost desperate. "You don't have to."

She shook her head, landing back on her feet and kneeing the man in the stomach. "...Daybreak...Furnace...One..."

Bucky panted, breathless little whimpers seeping out as he punched the glass. She knew what the words did to him and she didn't like it, but it was the only way for him to remain grounded. The slime taking her punches had the book, obviously had read it and knew the words. Once he was active, he responded only to the handler's commands. She knew. She'd done it so many times,
preparing him for a killing spree. She hadn't known then whether it was better or worse that he had memory issues with the events afterwards, but right now she was happy that he did. He wouldn't have to worry about this one. He would go under by her word and she would be there when he came out from under.

"...Freight car." In the moment of stunned silence that followed, the man took the opportunity to throw her off. She rolled onto her feet again, catching his gaze. "Soldier?"

_He stared at her, eyes void. "Ready to comply."

The man's lip curled, likely in fear was much as anger. "How do you know the words?"

_She snapped her fingers in the man's direction. Immediately, the Soldier moved, grabbing the man by the throat and holding him up in the air.

_She walked over and picked up the book, fingers running over the familiar worn leather. "Who do you think wrote them down?"

_The man's eyes went wide and he paled considerably - more than he had at the prospect of getting killed by the Soldier. "You're her. Oh God, you're her."

"Who's her?" Steve had managed to push through the doors, marching right over to them. "Bucky, drop."

_She held up a hand. "He's under right now. Don't talk to him. He'll snap and try to kill you."

_Steve's gaze was simply bewildered. "Tony, what the hell is going on?"

_The man hanging by his neck let out a breathless, mirthless laugh. "All this time and here she is, standing right in your midst."

"Drop him." She commanded and the Soldier obeyed, coming to stand just in front of her shoulder, a sure angle to protect her from all possible threats.

"You speak Russian?" Sam questioned from the doorway.

"It's a Russian-Ukrainian combination dialect that's almost extinct." She supplied in a way that almost sounded rehearsed. "If I were you, Captain, I would be thinking of what to do with this piece of shit here first and where I learned my other languages second."

_He went to move forward, but paused. Slowly, he looked over at her. "Where you learned, not when or how?"

_The Soldier's arm whirred and he covered her completely. The lights flickered back on. "Do not speak to the Engineer."

_The man on the floor coughed, a small victorious smile coming to his face. "So I was right. You are the Midnight Engineer."

_The Soldier broke the man's nose.

"Stop."

_He pulled back before to could lay another blow on the unconscious man.

"Who is the Midnight Engineer?" Steve asked slowly, voice low and deadly serious.
She squared her shoulders, staring the patriot down. "Ask Natasha. I'm busy."

"Stark, I'm not-"

"Neither am I." She snapped. "You want an explanation, Rogers? Too fucking bad - you're not getting one!"

The Soldier shifted even more, uneasy and on edge with his handler's usual cool calm disrupted. His gaze was locked on Steve, but his body knew what kinds of things she liked from him when she got like this. He needed to defend her. She protected him, he needed to protect her.

Containment soldiers broke into the room, lead by Sharon Carter. The Soldier tensed, but she ducked in front of him, metal-encased hand raised. "You shoot him and I'll kill every last one of you."

"I mean, I expected this from Steve." Natasha murmured, following behind. She glanced at the man crumpled on the floor. "Is he right?"

"I trust you even less than Spangles, Natalia."

The spy actually flinched, her confident smirk falling away.

"As it stands, I've got Barnes under control, but I need to be alone with him."

"Tony, if you think-"

"Does this sound like a fucking request?" She snapped. "I'm telling you. You want to watch? that's what the cameras are for. Get out."

"I'm sorry." He croaked, blinking his eyes open. She shushed him, running her hand through his hair again and bringing a water bottle to his lips.

"Just rest."

"I got caught." He whispered, flesh hand coming to grasp the one cupping his face. "I was discovered and you've lost everything now to save me."

"You mean all that stuff I was just using to make sure you stayed safe? Yeah, not really a big deal. I have more money than I know what to do with and access to all the resources I could ever need. I haven't lost anything but maneuvering room and I've done far more with far less than this."

He smiled grimly, letting his eyes fall closed again, breathing in the coconut of her wrapping around him. It had been so long since he was able to enjoy her touch. Even if this was temporary, it just felt so good. Not even the phantom throbbing of his body nor the memory of the pain in his skull could take away from the moment. She bent down and kissed his forehead.

"I'll be right here when you wake up, Bucky. Not a moment later."

Steve stood on the opposite end of the room, watching the tender way that she played with his hair, stroked his jawline. He would not leave her unattended and without armour in a room with a dangerous assassin but it seems his fears were unwarranted. New fears were taking their place now, though.
Bucky was asleep, his head resting on her outstretched legs. His body was splayed out on the concrete, but he either didn't feel it or didn't care. Tony was curled around his head, having more than once threatened to kill anyone who came within ten feet of them.

"Will you answer me now?"

She shook her head.

"Why not, Tony?"

"Can you imagine being asked to just blurt out the truth about something that you've been holding inside so long that it's toxic? To just . . . let something like that out?" She snorted. "I get that you'll never believe a word I say, but there are things that are genuinely better left unsaid."

"I was kidnapped right out of MIT, when I was thirteen years old." She [Antonia/Tony Stark "Iron Man", CEO of Stark Industries, Avengers Member] said, little to no inflection in her voice. "I was taken to a remote Cold War bunker in Siberia where I was indoctrinated with various forms of torture into the remains of HYDRA. That took place over the course of eight months. The next eight months I spent with several instructors from the Red Room, a Soviet spy training program disguised as a ballet school. I was beaten into a fighter there and was expected and forced to keep up that training throughout the remaining years. I was handed over then to a proper cell and given my first and last task - I was to be the handler of the Winter Soldier."

"They called her the Midnight Engineer." He [James/Bucky Barnes "Winter Soldier", WWII Veteran] murmured. "She was my handler. She would fix my arm, make sure I was back in order after my awakening from cryosleep and ensuring that through the wipes that I was still functional. She was one of the people responsible for my trigger words, finding it a more useful method of control than the constant wipes, which were starting to affect my physical function. It was her job. She was the only person who attended to me."

They were all together in a room now, watching the screen, listening to the words.

"I didn't know any of that." Pepper pursed her lips, looking away. "She used to wake up screaming, but I didn't think . . . I had no idea she'd . . . I don't know what to say."

Rhodes looked ready to be sick, unable to take the distance in his best friend's gaze. It wasn't right - that woman on screen wasn't Tony, she was Antonia.

Steve's brow furrowed and Thor looked vaguely affronted, like he couldn't imagine such a scenario.

"It makes sense." Natasha said at length. Clint nodded absently, eyes narrowed on the screen.

"I was responsible for supplying HYDRA and therein its allies with information which aided in terror attacks worldwide. I was the one who programmed the Winter Soldier with his targets. I cleaned the blood of my mother and father out of the Winter Soldier's arm after three days of sleepless waterboarding along with electroshock therapy." She continued, unperturbed. "They played the video of their deaths on loop during that time. I used my inheritance of Stark Industries
to assist HYDRA with weaponry and money. I allowed my technology to aid Project Insight because HYDRA told me to. I was responsible for countless deaths, both direct and indirectly."

"Tony played her hand once I was sent out after Nick Fury and Captain America." He supplied. "She gave Maria Hill a back door into Insight, lead Nick to finding out HYDRA was inside SHIELD and allowed me to escape after the helicarriers crashed. Tony was the one responsible for the discovery and destruction of HYDRA, even if at the same time, she's done damage to the fabric of this world for them." His face pinched and his voice took on a nearly desperate note. "Don't do anything to her. She did what she had to until she had to the chance to do what was right - to live long enough to use her knowledge of them against them. Don't hurt her."

Steve's hand came up to cover his mouth and his gaze was frozen on the screen, tears reflecting the screen's colours. Natasha and Clint watched on, visibly unaffected but no clue in their body language as to what they were thinking. Pepper was choking back the beginnings of a sob and Rhodes looked at once ready to cry and fight.

"Lost, used, discarded." Thor ruminated. "Evermore, she reminds me of Loki - less violent, less misguided, but Loki all the same."

"She's trying to take the blame." Bruce murmured, dropping his glasses on his lap and rubbing his hands over his face. "Hear the way she talks? Programmed the Winter Soldier - she makes him sound like a nuke, a machine." He gave a broken little laugh. "You watch, she'll lay herself on the guillotine just to ensure his safety. Make him sound out of control, lost and recovered."

"HYDRA had nothing to do with Ultron." She didn't look away from the camera, only blinked placidly. "Ultron was entirely my fault. I didn't want people involved in world protection - that was SHIELD's goal and HYDRA's objective and look at the mess they made, the kind of damage they did to the fabric of the global society. I was trying to make a group of robots with no self-preservation, drives only to preserve human life in a crisis. That was all I wanted. Then something happened with the AI and the result was Ultron."

"She never tries to hurt. God, she was hurt so much herself." His head fell forward. "So much . . . HYDRA, me, her parents, Yinsen . . . She never got a breath without it stinging with pain. Can you even understand the kind of fear she experienced because of the wormhole? The kind of nightmares she has? How many nights I've spent awake because she can't stop shaking? Better yet, can you think of how she felt watching Stane pull the Arc Reactor from her chest, lording over her that he took her heart out of her chest? Can you think of what it feels like to know that your heart comes out, that you have a massive gaping hole in the middle of your sternum waiting to be used against you?"

"I spent so long doing everything I could to keep him safe." She said, her voice getting more and more rigid. "The Soldier was the only person who cared for me. Symbiotic relationship. Of course,
for someone so necessary to me, we formed an attachment and that attachment continued even after he got free. I cared for him a great deal by necessity."

"That doesn't explain why you would get involved with his escape."

She considered her next words carefully. "I owe him. He is the only reason I am alive right now. Without him around, I would have been killed and disposed of long before now. It's likely you would have never known who I was past the missing persons. He alone is the reason I'm here and I felt that I owed him for that."

"Don't hurt her." He pleaded, reaching out before he thought better of it. "Please don't hurt her."

She sneered. "The real reason? I've been more than my fair share of honest today. I'm not interested in supplying you with more."

"I don't care what you do to me, just don't hurt her."

It was tape, from inside HYDRA's Washington establishment. Alexander Pierce was standing there, looming over Bucky, strapped down to a chair and violently writhing. The labcoats walked out of the vaulted area, followed nonchalantly by Pierce. A man in black who Steve recognized as Brock Rumlow pushed in a young woman with roughly cut off brown hair in second-hand men's clothes. Bucky was remotely shocked and he screamed, tensing and writhing harder. There was a distant command, the harsh sound of an elevator closing and leaving before the woman was on her feet, running over to the machine.

"Oh fuck." She panted, crouching down next to the wiring and just starting to pull wires. "Fuck fuck fuck fuck."

She got the right wire and the machine went quiet. She rounded it quickly, pulling the straps off his arms and chest.

"Oh God, Buck-"

He snapped up and wrapped his arms around her, hiding his face in her shoulder and screaming once more, his panting hard and strained against her skin. "Handler-"

"I'm here, I'm here." She pulled back and cupped his face in her hands. "Remember me? I'm here. I'm right here. What do you need me to do?"

"It burns. Burns to think."

"Do you want to go under? To not feel? I can't make that pain go away any other way."

"I don't want to go under. I feel worse when I go under."

"It's okay. I won't force you, Bucky."
He nodded slowly and leaned heavily on her as she sunk to the floor, pulling him with her. His head was resting on her thigh and her fingers were gently running through his hair. The more he slept, the better he would feel and the better he would operate. They wanted him at pique condition and there was no better way than to give him to her.

He jolted occasionally as the last remnants of the torture worked through him. "What do they want me for this time?"

"A new mission." She replied, fingers gliding through his hair. "Don't focus on that now. Breathe and sleep."

"Tell me, Handler."

She shook her head. "Not now."

"Engineer-"

"Soldier-"

"Tell me, Tony."

Her fingers paused there for a fraction of a second. "Howard and Maria Stark."

". . . I thought they wanted you to take over the company?"

"They do. And I will."

"Without . . . ?"

"I'll have to wing it, I guess. Lean on Obadiah Stane."

His face scrunched up. "I don't like him."

"A snake, I know. But I have no one else."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry, Buck. There's nothing for you to do other than complete your mission. I will still be here when you complete it."

He looked like he wanted to protest more, but kept his mouth shut.

"Get some rest. I'll brief you when you're better."

"Will I ever be better, Engineer?"

"I will make sure of it."

". . . That was her?" Pepper's voice shook. "That was just before Howard was killed? Oh God- I was in Miami for her. Two weeks - one before and one after Howard and Maria's deaths - and all that time, she was trapped with HYDRA . . ."
"I have no words." Rhodes growled. "I want to demand answers - why she didn't tell us. But I know. I wouldn't have said anything either - would have gotten too many people hurt. I want her to have told us."

Steve sat frozen, eyes glued to the screen.

Legs together, arms apart, straps across the hips, chest, neck and forehead. Electrodes on her head, her forearms, all sensitive skin.

"We must ensure our investment. Your loyalty means the world to us, Antonia. We do this because it is best."

She didn't struggle when they dunked the cloth in water and didn't move when they laid the cloth over her mouth and nose. Her eyes were fixed on the screen in the ceiling, playing images of her parents from newspaper clippings and broadcasts. She blinked back tears - there was no use for them and it would only make this worse than it was already promising to be.

"The Americans call this 'waterboarding'. I wonder what you will think of it. You will have to tell us, Antonia."

There was the sound of a crash, Maria Stark begging for mercy and the dead sound of metal breaking through tissue and shattering bone. She fought to keep as still as possible, maintain a slow and even breathing pace to combat the constriction in her lungs from the cloth.

Then the shocks began. Over and over, with each blow to Howard's face, with each tightening of the Soldier's fist around Maria's throat and with each bullet fired the voltage jumped and what was an uncomfortable sting became an unbearable searing. Gasps and cries caught the cloth in her mouth and that's when the choking started.

Water - water and no air in her lungs. For seven days.

"I can't imagine." Was all Steve had to say. "I would have never guessed. I can't . . . I have nothing to say to that."

"I understand her better, I think." Thor rumbled. "She is a very complex creature haunted by very unnerving things. She makes more sense to me now, I would say. I wish to see her. May I?"

"I need to see her." Bruce said at length. "I need to see her right now. Bring me to her."
"Sounds like coercion to me." Clint said, rolling his head around to look at Natasha.

"Clear cut case if I've ever seen one. Under duress, doing unspeakable things." She nodded, face grim, but eyes veiled.

"I would think that would make her innocent."

"Bucky too, I'd say."

"It would also be best if they got some time alone together."

"Probably for the best."

"And if they don't want to talk . . . "

"They don't talk."

"You read my mind."

"I'm good at that."

"Time to go."

"Definitely."


"I have to process this." Pepper muttered, standing and leaving the room.

Rhodes scrubbed his face, hands covering his mouth as he watched another run of the torture chamber. "Me too. I . . . I need a moment."


"I've never seen something so messed up." Sam whistled. "That's a pretty impressive setup there."


"Leave them to themselves." Thor waved the camera and crew back into the room. "Leave them be."


Tony stood in front of the United Nations Congress, hands clasped behind her back with Bucky at her side.

"You both admit to all of it?"

"Of course." Tony answered smoothly. "I was responsible for all of it, including the programming of the Winter Soldier."

"Tony-"

The glare she shot him was positively venomous and he instinctively shut his mouth.
"You claim responsibility for his actions?"

"They were at my behest."

T'Challa sat forward, fingers laced together. "It sounds to me as if this was do-or-die. Should you have denied them, would you have been killed?"

"Not the first time."

"Would they have found someone else should you have put up complete resistance?"

"Not someone of my caliber, but yes. I imagine they would have."

The Wakandan prince nodded to himself. "Would that not make you guilty of the action, but not guilty for the deed? I would say that for force of will alone to resist their torture, to withstand development of Stockholm Syndrome is beyond admirable."

"She is guilty of it regardless." The American representative retorted.

T'Challa breathed through his nose. "Aside from their words and some matching timelines, we actually have no proof that they are responsible for anything. Timelines and dates are far too coincidental to actually be taken as evidence. Is the law not 'innocent until proven guilty'?"

There was no reply.

"I would hope that a council with no proof would lean towards clemency. I would also imagine there are a few of you in this room tainted by their dealings with HYDRA or SHIELD. Let us not forget that when being down judgement on the lives of Miss Stark and Mister Barnes."

"Why should you have a say in this?" France rebutted. "Wakanda has never been wronged by these two."

"And how would you know that with such certainty?" T'Challa raised an eyebrow.

"Well . . . "

"Please, do not interrupt me again." The prince replied. "Their innocence, I think, if intact. The question is to be whether the story be released publicly. Would you be adverse to this?"

"I . . . I don't want our names released. It's . . . enough to live with without people knowing."

"Consider it a gift." T'Challa gave her a small smile and she nodded in return. Around his neck was still the small charm - a polished chunk of vibranium that just had a set of coordinates and the words They're coming here - Midnight Engineer. The face of the man who had given him the charm, deep in the Wakandan jungles, had been hidden by a black mask, but he would recognize the arm anywhere. "It is in any ruler's best interest to make as many friends as possible and preserve the innocence of as many as he can. I endeavour to be such a king and should my mercy today help accomplish such a goal, I would ould be a fool not to take it."

"Thank you, your Majesty." She inclined her head to him, a secretive smile on her lips.

Tony was forty-three the first time she slept with Bucky curled around her in Stark Tower, the
pair finally free.

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Taking Blame

She hurts and he doesn't know what to do.

Sleepless and vacant, she sits there at her table, staring at the little ARC Reactor sitting there in front of her. Upstairs, high in the Tower, the rest of the Avengers sleep. They followed her back to New York after the hearing in the UN and have refused to leave until she was 'better'. But he knew what that meant - she would take a few days of their forced company, that of the very people so quick to leave her behind, and find it in herself to smile again. Unconvinced, they would stay a few more weeks, but her skill at farce went far beyond their patience. Eventually, they would be pulled away by something else - boredom, impatience, duty or a disaster and forget about her all over again. There was not a soul resting above them that took the time to make sure she didn't fall behind, content that if she smiled when they were around that she didn't cry when she was alone.

He almost wanted to go wake them up, bring them down here, show this to them. But then, he'd seen the documentary. He'd seen what the interviews had been edited into. If they weren't moved by that, they would be moved by nothing, and he wasn't sure his words - still broken and haltingly cautious as Russian and English mixed in his head alongside the staunchly formal vocabulary he was accustomed to - would sway them at all.

He wanted to call out her name, have her turn her weary gaze on him and fall into him, let him handle the weight for a little bit. He wanted her to sob into his shirt, thump a weak fist against his chest as if the blows would drain the horror. He wanted to be her shelter, a place where she could be herself without the reputation of Iron Man, the Midnight Engineer, Tony Stark or Antonia Elizabeth Stark hanging over her; a place where she could blissfully be nothing but his, warm and safe and surrounded by everything that made her happy. But then, he'd never been that for her before.

The shelter had always been her. She was the strong one, even now: withstanding the torture and the subliminal dogma, never hopeless even in despair, forever using everything she had at her disposal without a man left behind. She was constantly aware, constantly moving - a restless, watchful eye on the entire world that made plans and changed them faster than most people could think. She had scarred herself over and over for him in every sense: her mind was broken in ways that would never be fixed, tainted and twisted by the things she had to do and the trauma of the things she couldn't do; her body still bore the ragged scars, right between the hips, where she had told him to strike her. It was one of the things most revolting to him, something that even after all this time and all the memories, still made him violently and uncontrollably wretch, vomiting as soon as he saw it.

He had done as she'd instructed, wounding that one specific spot, then she sent him away. What he wasn't there for came a few hours later, when the bleeding started. She'd waited an hour or so, just to make sure her plan had been successful and before the pain became too unbearable, before the called in the guards to inform them that she thought she'd miscarried. Of course, when they got her to the doctor, he'd had to immediately perform surgery. The bruising the Soldier had left had been miserable and she was sure the doctor thought her uterus had exploded. He had cut into her and removed the damaged organ entirely, much to Pierce's chagrin later on. She knew that the old man had been testing a theory with her - inseminate her forcefully with the Soldier's child, see what would come of it and should the child show any early promise, take it to be trained and moulded into the proper HYDRA weapon, a beautiful combination of its mother's genius and its father's serum. It would have been lovely for him, she's sure, but she had decided as soon as she'd woken up, violated from the procedure, that she would rather condemn her potential for life than give
them one. Her hand was a good one this time and she'd taken Pierce's valuable bet right from underneath him. Of course, as consequence, she had been immediately reassigned to her duties as soon as the doctor was finished hastily stitching her back together and she had to be carefully ginger with herself for the next few months, fighting off two infections and restitching herself on the floor of her bedroom. HYDRA had kept it all on tape.

Oh, how he cried. He had run to her immediately, begging for it not to be true. But she had said nothing, only petting his hair as he grappled onto her waist, kissing the rough scarring with the same reverence he handled chinaware. He had wept into her skin, clinging to her like he used to his mother, wishing then and now that awful things wouldn't happen to people he loved. Steve had been dying in his bed, coughing up blood hot as boiling water while he simmered in his fever. Tony had so willingly thrown herself into a bed of knives, laying atop them and slowly sinking without the faintest whimper of protest. So long she had sheltered him as best she could, always providing a haven for him to crawl to and lick his wounds. She was the entirety of his little world and as she suffered, he fell with her, sinking beneath the water with nothing to him but her. If he could save her, he would find everything he needed, more than he could ever want.

As ever, though, he stood just behind her shoulder, following her, shadowed by her, propelled to grace in the wake of her implosion. Who was he, really, to try to keep a dying star in the sky? He couldn't keep control of his own body anymore - who was he to tell Atlas to keep fighting, that he could make it all better if he just pushed a little harder?

She knew he was there. He was always there.

She wondered sometimes what he thought about. So quiet, eyes intelligent but silent, body loose but aware. He hovered behind her like an angel, his wings ripped from him and his halo chipped away a little light at a time until he made his cloak from darkness and his grace from gunfire. But for all the evil that radiates from him like he's trying to tell himself to be afraid, he can't bear the thought of her coming to harm. Seeing the scars on her body, his angelic essence spills through the cracks in his ice. Ichor drips from his eyes as his trembling hands trace the age-old damage she can't be bothered to remember as he mourns her injury like they're stains on a fountain of infinity. She doesn't understand what possesses him to feel this - she could never help him in any meaningful way. She never got him away from HYDRA, that was of his own making. She had never been able to stop the wipes, to halt the freezing, to find a way to return his memories, to get rid of the words she programmed into him to control him. She did more damage than he recovered from, took pieces of him he could never get back, had him soil himself with dirt to pick her up off the floor.

She only felt worse when he would stare at her, three sleepless days onwards, worry and fear and desperation caged behind a mouth taught not to open. It was like he was waiting for her to lift herself, to validate his belief in her power, but there was nothing to believe in. She was a mortal woman, broken by time and fear and sitting under a mountain of knowledge she would give almost anything to forget. Yet he was always there, always standing tall and proud as the spirit of vengeance that he was. Yet, for her, he would drop to his knees, lay in the filth next to her, pull her atop him like she didn't deserve it.

All of those years spent under the weight of that knowledge and her shoulders were so numb she no longer felt the burn. She knew it was there, but she only properly recognized it seeing him trapped in that little glass and steel cube, facing down Zemo with stanch silence. How could she ever repay him for his silence? To keep her secrets, so loyal that even under the spell of his control words, he didn't give her away? She was well aware that there were many power-hungry people inside HYDRA who were willing to use whatever scraps of information they could get a hold of to
move up the ladder. She knew that these same people would have known his control words. Even then, he had kept silent. Her name had never left his lips, even when she was trapped in that bunker with him, her name meaning nothing. She could see the devotion he kept locked in the recesses of his heart that could not be reached by the pain of the wipes - it was in the way he would reach out for her after forgetting who she was, the way he would step in front of her when guards and scientists got too close, how his familiarity with her would vanish and he would become the Soldier if her posture slipped into unease for even a second.

She had never done anything worth that kind of love. She had never been worth his protection. And this wasn't HYDRA's programming either - she was enough of a precious resource to have the Soldier assigned to her, but not enough to program him to her. He was much more useful. No matter how well she could kill, how refined her movements and executions were, she was still just her. He was so much more - a skilled marksman by nature, the product of a Serum - and she was no match. He had come to her, took her into his soul of his own accord and it broke her heart every day to see him suffer in lieu of her. She deserved it. She wasn't good enough, didn't think fast enough, took her time to make her moves and let opportunity to save him pass her by just to gain a few extra inches of maneuvering room. She'd done nothing but leave him behind, run to have him chase her into and away from danger. She had even thrown him to the Captain, using him as bait in her games and leaving him to chance in Bucharest.

And yet, there he was. Standing behind her, only gritting his teeth more as she slipped from under her debt. He stood a little straighter, taking on her share as well while offering her a hand to help her stand from where she'd been crushed. He looked down at her the way he would look up at an angel.

And she didn't deserve a moment of it.

Bucky was sitting at one end of the couch in the common floor. Steve sat in a chair off to the right, on the far side of the room. Bucky wouldn't look at him, blankly staring ahead at a little bauble on the shelving unit next to the tv and the lamp. It was an inconsequential little thing, sitting there being gentle and ambiguous, unobtrusive amidst all the other chaos piled there. A little, rusted metal star created unevenly with the points being different lengths and angles. It was tiny, made out of the scrap metal and flecks of copper wiring from the floor.

He'd spent months and months collecting enough metal to make it and even then, he spent weeks after the first wipe trying to remember what he had wanted all the scrap in his vest pocket for in the first place, only recalling the feeling of it being impossibly important. After that, he had taken a few extra minutes each mission while waiting for a target or after the assassination to mould its shape, little by little, until it resembled the only thing that symbolized him. Barely big enough to cover the tips of two of his fingers, he had held it out to her on a little loop of shoelace repurposed from his boot after he'd snapped them. He'd pressed it into her hand as she secured him for freezing. He didn't get to see her reaction to it before the blackness of the frost took him and she never mentioned it when he was awoken later. He didn't know if, at sixteen, she'd not simply discard it to hide from HYDRA. Woken two years later, he'd seen the faded-grey black lace peeping out of her the left cup of her bra. When she'd been released to take over Stark Industries, he'd figured she had other things she would keep instead.

But there it was, on a little glass stand inside a little glass box, preserved in all its minute glory for all to see.

He hadn't been able to take his eyes off it, even as Steve asked more and more probing questions that weren't answered in the documentary. He kept his mouth closed, refusing to answer because he
didn't have to, but Steve went abruptly silent.

His senses started to crawl the way they did when he felt owned and he turned to face it. It was a gentle tingling at the back of his neck, almost in his hairline, but he knew there was only one person who owned him, though there had been many to control him.

Tony didn't spare Steve a glance. Her body was heavy and sore and the Reactor ached horribly in her chest. Hours spent hunched over compressed the metal into her ribcage and subsequently the right side of her heart and right lung, the pain piercing right through to her spine and stabbing outwards. Immediately, he shifted position, one leg coming to lay across the inseam of the couch, his metal arm across the back of the cushions, posture slightly slouched but open. She slumped right into him, pressing the whole front of her chest into his and sighing against his neck as his eternal heat started to work its magic. He wrapped her in his flesh arm, keeping the chill of the metal away from her skin.

He kissed the top of her head. "Good?"

"I still stand by my theory."

"Oh yeah?"

"You have a better one?"

"Super soldier metabolism?"

She huffed, resting her chin on his pectorals to meet his gaze. "Nah. Like mine better."

"Mmm." He blinked lethargically at her.

"What theory?"

He flickered his gaze over to Steve, suddenly cold and appraising - defensive and threatening.

"He's like a human-shaped bonfire." Tony replied instead, reaching up to brush brunette tresses off his clavicle. "I hypothesize the reason he's so warm is because he's spent most of his time in cryosleep and his body makes up for it when he's awake by making him so hot."

"You can thank my mama for that, not cryo."

She weakly thumped her chin on his chest. "Don't go and get a big head just because you're free."

He looked back down at her and the chill vanished from his face. "I'm not free. I'm yours."

Alarm shot across her face and only the arm across her lower back stopped her from bolting like the startled deer she very much resembled. Her voice was high and strangled. "What?"

"Shh, doll, shh." He soothed, metal hand coming to caress down her hair and pet her cheekbones. "I'm yours. I've always been yours. Come Hell or high water, I will always come back here."

"You don't belong to me, Bucky. You don't belong to anyone." She was adamant, fervent. "You're not something to be owned."

He cracked a smirk. "You make it sound like you don't want me."

"That's not- I'm not-" She huffed, disgruntled. "Buck. Don't play with me."
He settled her back down, tucking her head under his chin. "Wouldn't dream of it, doll."

"What did you mean, then? I'm not HYDRA - I won't keep you here or make you do anything. You know that, right? Even though I did all of that, I won't now."

He squeezed her to stop her rambling. She would work herself into a frenzy. "I know, my sweet girl, I know. But I'm yours."

She huffed again. "What do you mean by that, Barnes?"

"You're my Engineer. You're the person that's always there. I wouldn't be anything but a jittery mess of broken nerves if not for you."

"Please." She snorted, dismissive. "Steve's right over there. He'd put his best friend back together."

"That's not what I mean." He twisted his head, rubbing his cheek into her hair. "You're more than a friend, more than an ally, more than a caretaker. You're more to me than a lover. My world can't spin without you. I don't know what it is, but I gravitate to you. Clint asked me the other day if I'd ever think about moving out of the Tower because I, apparently, like to be alone. Until he asked me, I hadn't even thought about it. I move to your side without thinking about it and there is nowhere else in this world where I feel safer. Am I making any sense?"

He felt her eyes close and she didn't answer. He gave a little squeeze.

"Maybe not. Honestly, it doesn't make sense to me, either. It's like when I'm away, my world spins. Next to you, it levels out and everything is clear, sensible. I swear, if I left my body to its own devices, I would just follow you everywhere. I wouldn't even think about it."

She sighed heavily after a few moments of Steve's silent, intense stare. "You don't have to try and make me feel better. You don't have to make something up. I know exactly what PTSD separation does to someone's emotions. It was like that with . . . with Yinsen. No need to put up a front."

He grunted, unimpressed, before physically repositioning her on his lap, facing him. He raised an eyebrow at her. "Is that so?"

Her eyes were hard, masked. "Yes."

"Then how about you stop hiding from me, huh?" He sat up and wrapped his arms around her back, faces close enough to share air. "If it wasn't true, then why did you come up here? You have a massive bath in your en suite. JARVIS would have filled it with the perfect temperature water and you could float face-up in the water, letting it take out all the stress and pain in your body before falling into your bed made of angel feathers and clouds to sleep it off. Instead, you're in the common floor's living room, laying on top of a hard lump of soldier and muscle to have a weird mix of hot at your front and cold at your back. The position was an uncomfortable flex and your head was bent awkwardly."

"I-"

"And me? I know that Steve's sitting over there, desperately hoping I'll open up to him, let him fix me. I know Dr. Banner is good enough to do maintenance on my arm. I know I can spar with Natasha or Clint. I can watch anyone do their work if I want to be unsociable where people can see me. I can have JARVIS teach me how to do things or answer questions. I don't. I'm already moving before the fact I've woken up from a nightmare instead of a concussion has even settled in. I'm in your lab, sitting myself down in a chair where I can see you and most of the room. I watch you and my heart rate returns to normal. I can think again. I'm calm and still like a glass of water. I find"
myself pulling you into the gym before I've even stopped thinking about how I would like to spar. I
open up my arm the way you do and look at the mess of wires and plates and motherboards and try
to understand what you see. I watch and ask questions and you answer me without hesitation. Want
to know something you never saw?"

She mutely nodded.

"The reason they had you become my handler was because I didn't respond to anyone else. I took
orders and their scientists meddled with my arm, but I lashed out more than once. I killed more
than a couple of them without being able to stop myself. Whatever this is between us isn't
something I could be taught. It's not something I learned."

Her hands are shaking hard where they're tucked between their bodies.

"I know you didn't learn that either. You never succumbed to HYDRA. You were constantly
fighting, thinking, working, yet you settled on me. I- I remember you taking the time to brush my
hair, shave my face, clean the frost out of my arm and repair the damage. We're something else,
doll. Something all our own."

It wasn't hard to hear the way her breath got caught in her throat. His smile was gentle, tender as he
ducked down a little bit to meet her downcast gaze. He covered the Reactor with his metal hand,
the blue glow reflecting off his fingers. His voice had dropped, soft and intimate.

"Neither of us are really complete." Both of them were looking at the steel on steel.

"Not really." She replied, demure.

"I know you believe me. I know you know this. You wouldn't have kept the star otherwise."

Her shoulders dropped and she chuckled a little. "Saw that, huh? Should have guessed."

"Mmm." He nosed her cheek.

She gave up, letting herself fall limpily into his embrace. "I don't deserve this."

He kissed her neck. "Neither of us deserved what happened. I have no idea if I'm enough of a
reward for enduring it all, but I'm plenty satisfied where I am."

She pushed a deep, tired breath through her nose. "You're more than enough."

He adjusted her again and wrapped his metal arm under her ass. "Let's get you to bed."

"So, I gotta know, what is it about her, man?"

Bucky looked over the rim of his coffee cup at Sam and Clint, both staring at him. He took a
moment to swallow before pursing his lips. "Pardon?"

"Well, rumour's got it that she's great in the sack." Clint elaborated. "Is that true?"

His brow furrowed. "And what does Tony's ability in bed have to do with anything?"

"So you aren't sleeping with her? After your loverboy speech last night in front of Steve, I was sure
you were."

"If I'm hearing you right, and correct me if I'm wrong, you want to know about Tony's sex life."
"Ability." Clint amended.

"I just wanted to know if you two are a thing. Not more than that." Sam said.

He considered his answer for a moment. "Well, she's an engineer. You'd be surprised at what she comes up with." Then he took another sip of his coffee and walked out of the kitchen.

Tony wandered down to her lab in the early hours of the morning before Natasha would find her and scold her for only sleeping two hours. What she didn't expect was to find Bucky. She'd given him access, obviously, long before he'd even lived here. She just . . . didn't think he'd use it without her being there.

He was at her desk, a few of her regular tools within easy reach of his right hand. Several screens were in front of him, all open with schematics of her suit. Dum-E, Buttrfinger and U were crowded around him, cooing and beeping.

"Next, you must solder the two halves together. Be gentle. These areas are very delicate." JARVIS instructed.

She wandered closer, more curious than anything. Peering over his shoulder, she saw a little star, made of scraps of metal from his arm ruggedly soldered together rather inexpertly. A little jar of red paint lay off to the side with a brush, likely pilfered from Steve. It was the middle of the star that captured her attention. A little blue LED bulb was attached to a base with a thin wire running out, connected to a AAA battery pack.

He was positioning the front plate of the star over the back plate where the bulb was attached, holding it with his metal hand as he carefully soldered it closed, nimbly avoiding the power wire.

Quietly, she backed away and left the lab, smiling to herself. She would give him some more time to himself. She took a long bath and then a long shower before heading back down to get her coffee. It would put her at increased odds of facing off with Natasha, but that was okay. She even managed breakfast before going back down to the lab.

When she returned, artfully dodging Clint, Bucky was gone. Her worktop had been cleaned and the bots were milling about as usual. However, sitting front and center there was the new little star. It was sitting on top of a battery pack, its little glow wonderful. Across the star, in careful black paint, was Bucky. When she picked it up, across the black casing of the battery, in gold lettering, was Tony. Underneath the wonderful little present was a note.

I wanted to make a tiny ARC Reactor, but Jarvis said I wouldn't be able to. So I did a battery as a placeholder. Make a Reactor for me?

- Bucky

Two days later, when Bucky walked into her room to see if she wanted to watch a movie with him, his little star was sitting on top of a tiny Reactor. Next to it was a much better star also connected to a Reactor, but this one was made from the same plate metal and paint as the one of her armour. The little thing was seamless. In messy scrawl next to it was a little sticky note.

I'll leave it up to you to write our names on it. Gold again, please!

As leaves fall from trees, the Avengers left the Tower. As he predicted, most didn't ride out the
But he never left. Even when Steve asked, begged him to, he didn't flinch. He stood just behind her, at her shoulder.
The silence was soft and gentle in the early hours of the morning like this.

He woke up at six am, his clock perfect even before his capture. Tony, on the other hand, has forever been erratic. She's had to operate and fix him at all hours of the day, awake for days and weeks past her limits. Exhaustion has never meant anything to her, trained out of her at a tender beginning of her maturity.

She is a phenomenally light sleeper as well. Surrounded by concrete and guns constantly, high-strung senses as second-nature, she was constantly blinking her eyes open and scanning for a couple seconds before falling back into shallow rest to be disturbed only a few moments later. Even after she took over SI and built her own homes, sound-proofed and controlled, she would jerk awake at phantom noise. It took JARVIS years to soothe those instincts, though they were never truly appeased until she had reinforced him against sabotage and run his electrical system to an Arc Reactor.

Here, however, back to his chest, head pillowed on his flesh arm while she curled around the metal one, she was entirely dead to the world. She would sleep for days, uninterrupted, if he was there. His nerves were less sharp than hers in this sense - frozen for so long, brought to bear only when useful, he had a keen awareness for threat but was never threatened by allies. The critical difference allowed him to sleep around Pierce, but kept her awake. Her sense of danger was corrupted, but his attuned alertness for hostility and killing intent were perfectly functional.

Every morning she was in his arms, he cherished. He would watch her sleep for hours, content to
lay there with her and count her breaths, her heartbeats, adjust himself so she could sleep more comfortably. He had taken to showering just before bed, his arm still nice and warm from the heat of the water. There were even a precious few mornings where she would turn over, chest to chest, and nuzzle into him. There had never been a greater compliment given to him, a more satisfying feeling, than knowing that the woman he loved felt so safe with him.

Along the bottom of the scarring at her navel, there were new letters, done up in silver, red and black ink. She had hidden them from him for the better part of two months, sneakily wearing his shirts just so that he wouldn't be tempted to take her coverings off her.

*Don't let our pain lend hurt to your smile.*

He smiled against the back of her neck, slowly tensing his muscles to press her closer, his arm plates clicking and shifting quietly. They weren't loud even in the empty, early-morning stillness of the Tower. Only Bruce Banner was here anyway, two floors below and mostly self-reliant. Every weekday, however, the other scientist would meet the couple for breakfast. Two, sometimes three hours of talk and company the likes of which neither of them had ever had, and then they would all go about their daily lives. He found it funny - the most unstable man in the world being the most stable friend. Weekends were theirs alone, however, and they took the time to make up for time lost.

She rolled over, eyes still closed, but breathing different. "Morning."

"Morning, doll."

As always, her lips quirked up at the cute nickname. "We've got that gala tonight."

"The Firefighters' one, right?"

"Yeah."

He kissed her messy hair. "You said 'we'. Am I coming?"

"I mean, you don't have to if you're not comfortable. Just thought I'd give you the option. We're together now, for good."

He tipped her head back, stealing a little kiss from her because *that was something he could do now.* "I'll go."

"That settles that, then."

He chuckled, ducking down to nuzzle and rumble against her neck. Already pliant with warmth and sleep, she gave up entirely on trying to control her body and melted back down to her most liquid.

"I don't think I'll ever get enough of touching you." He murmured.

She ran a hand through his hair. "Take anything you want from me. It's all yours."

His hands slid up the curve of her back pulling her head back, his teeth running along her windpipe. "Anything? How much is anything?"

"Everything. All I've got is everything I'm willing to give."

"And what if I just want you?" He bit down lightly, making her squirm.

"I'm all yours. Finally, I'm all yours."
His heart softened at the statement, the gentle keen and whisper of relief in the words. He spent so much intervening time on ice, but she was awake and present for all of it and struggled for them to be here, bet the world and its control just to save him.

"God, I don't deserve you." He pulled her as close as he could, wrapping one of her legs around his waist. "But I've never been any less than selfish when it comes to you."

Her voice was hoarse when she laughed. "What do you think I was doing all this time? Being selfless? God no. I wanted you here, just like this and if you didn't notice, I'm the daughter of a billionaire and always get what I want."

He peered up at her, the blue glow from the Reactor highlighting the clear blue glass of his eyes.

"Do you think you'll ever regret it?"

She pulled him closer with her leg, thick satisfaction washing over each part of her his skin touched, sparks tingling up her thigh from where his metal palm and fingers pressed in. "Not a goddamn chance. Though you might regret being stapled to me now that I'm introducing you to the public."

"I doubt there's anyone in the world that can make me love you less." He nosed around her jaw, kissing the spot just under and behind her ear, voice a low-pitched rumble. "And if there are, I'll kill them."

She laughed, weaving her fingers into his hair. She felt him smile against her neck, his stubble rubbing against her skin.

By the time she was done with him, Bucky looked like a whole other person. Fragments of James Barnes - the real one, from the fourties - flashed through his mind in half-burned pieces.

"How did you manage it without cutting my hair?" He asked, checking himself out from every possible angle while she messed around in the closet.

"Hair spray and ingenuity. Together, they can do amazing things." She called back.

It was fascinating, really. His hair was pushed back but still fluffy, some carefully styled strands falling to frame his face. He was in a pristine suit that fit him snug without being constricting. It was black, but shone blue in the light and he had on a slate grey slim tie that had diagonal stripes of reflective silver across it, wonderfully and bizarrely matching his metal hand. He looked . . . presentable, fashionable, suave and rich. Nothing about him, from his manicured facial hair to his shiny leather shoes did anything to suggest he was the man who killed the woman he was escorting's parents. The man in the mirror would never own three different combat suits, keep rifles next to his bed or be capable of putting his hand through a porcelain sink by accident. This man would never dream of becoming a soldier, had laughed off assassins as movie nonsense.

Tony walked out of the closet wrapped up in the most stunning dress he'd ever had the pleasure of seeing.

It was black to match his suit, but the satin wrapped around her torso like refined oil, liquid in its motion. False crystals decorated her breasts, floating on the sea of black, funnelling in a point down to her belly button. The black satin fell off her right hip as water would from a gravy boat. From underneath the satin came out lengths of matte deep blue silk that brushed the floor. Closed-toe black stilettos peeped out from under the material. Black eye shadow dominated her lid, but shades of blue flirted out above her lashes. Her hair was very loosely curled, cascading in strong waves.
down her back and pooling in her collarbone. Hanging from her neck was the only piece of jewelry that Bucky had ever given her.

He put his fist through the glass case of the jewelry store that he had been perched upon when he shot the Congressman. It didn't matter to him whether or not the alarm sounded or whether there was video of him from the store cameras. He wasn't thinking about that.

It was an exquisite piece and he had noticed it out of all the elaborate gemstone arrangements. It was in the back of the display facing the street, but as soon as he caught sight of it, he couldn't get it out of his head. It reminded him of her so strongly, so crushingly it actually put a hiccup in his stride. He held it carefully in his metal hand the whole time he took getting back, purposefully denting the plating in his arm just to make sure that he got to see her.

When the door closed behind him in her lab, hidden away in her Tower far from their prying eyes, he pulled her in and kissed the breath out of her, making sure that she knew her importance. Then the clasped it around her neck - such a fragile little silver chain, so little in his hands, holding aloft a little circular diamond cut in little circled layers. It refracted light in every direction and, he later realized, echoed her Reactor to a slightly eerie degree. She hadn't had the Reactor at the time, but she was kidnapped six months later, so maybe he was a little more clairvoyant than they thought.

He watched it rise with her breaths when she looked down at it and he went back in the ice with the image of it bouncing while he fucked her locked in the forefront of his mind.

She seemed well aware of what she had chosen to do, even going so far as to smile sheepishly. "It's my favourite."

He puffed out a laugh, aborting a neck rub at the last second to avoid messing up his hair. "You're making it very difficult for me to keep myself in check."

"Well, this wrapping isn't for anyone else." She replied, walking up to him and running her hands down the edges of his suit jacket. "you're not the only one that's going to be suffering during this ball."

"I hope you have enough room to part your legs in that. We might not make it back to the Tower before I lose my belt." He smirked, tilting her head back and kissing lightly up her neck. "I would hate to have to ruin something so lovely. Not to mention I'd rip the dress."

She snorted. "I'd be more worried about having such a large stain on the front of your pants when I'm done with you."

"Promises, promises." He teased, pulling back before he really wound up under her skirts. After all, he so loved feeling her claw at his hair when he used his mouth.

"C'mon. Pepper's going to be really mad if I miss this one."

"Lead the way, doll."

"Still think there's no one that can make you love me less?" She joked, voice tight with irritation."

"This isn't so bad."

She jerked her chin to someone approaching from behind him. "You're about to meet someone who'll make you change your mind."
"Well, well, well. If it isn't Tony Stark."

Bucky found himself pushed aside by a much smaller man with a weasel face and a greasy look.

"And who is this? New muscle?"

Tony's smile was sarcastic and plastic, bitter to a large degree. If he hadn't already started disliking the man, that would have done it. "He's certainly got plenty of that. Baby, I'd like you to meet Jack Hammer. Hammer, this is my partner, James."

"Yeah, the new resident muscle. I heard about that." Hammer looked him over appraisingly, like he was a good horse or something. "Isn't it weird sleeping with someone so stupid?"

"I've never slept with you, so I wouldn't know."

"Ouch. You wound me so very deeply, Tony. I thought we were close."

"If I recall correctly, you tried to kill me." She sniped back, taking a sip from her scotch.

"I never tried to kill you. Vanko was the one that wanted you dead."

"Being the one to fund him certainly doesn't mean you agreed with him, right?" She looked out over the dance floor, done with the conversation.

"C'mon, Tony, that's no way to be." Hammer groused. "I came all this way to see you, even."

"Delightful." She drawled back.

"Aww. Getting all defensive?" Hammer chuckled oily to himself. "Don't feel the need to play nice with a meathead around?"

Bucky gave his best smile, the one he remembered using on the women before his deployment in the war. "That's no way to talk to someone you've just met. Give me a chance to introduce myself and make a proper impression, okay?"

Hammer's rodent-shaped mouth smiled as he extended a hand. "Finally, someone of Tony's acquaintance with manners."

He took the smaller man's hand in his metal one, not squeezing but letting the metal bite. "I'm James Barnes, but you probably know me better as Bucky."

Hammer's eyes went wide. "Bucky Barnes?"

He let his smile get even more charming. "I've been back Stateside for almost a year, getting rehabilitated after HYDRA. It's been hard to shake my conditioning as the Winter Soldier, but Tony's been very generous and has helped me a lot."

Hammer was either very brave or very stupid. "Is that so? Rumour has it she's helped plenty of people. Has she told you the number?"

"What do you mean?"

"Tony's always been a promiscuous little thing. She just loves using every trick in the book to make people feel good around her. Or inside her."

Bucky's smile never faltered. He knew Tony was nothing if not keenly paying attention to his
responses. "She's particularly talented, certainly. I met one of the dames - Carrie, from Vanity Fair, I believe - and she was just wonderful. It's actually quite reassuring to know that my girl can catch such beautiful and wonderful people. I have to ask, though, how you feel about being so immediately disqualified from that list?"

Hammer flinched. The satisfaction that ran through her was immense and intense. "Disqualified? What makes you think that?"

Bucky cocked his head. "Well, you don't exactly fit. I mean, people like Carrie and I are attractive, well-spoken and charming."

"Not to mention intelligent." Tony threw in.

"Right. Almost forgot that one." He tossed a glittering smile her way before turning back to Hammer. "I mean, most people tend not to insult war vets or super soldiers. But, to be fair, I've been on ice since the fourties. Perhaps I've just been lucky enough to meet the well-bred few left in the world."

"If Tony's well-bred, there's a massage parlor in Chinatown you haven't been to yet." A greasy wink made his skin crawl. "She's got some techniques they would be envious of."

"Speaking from rumour, not experience."

"Perhaps both."

Tony snorted and Bucky laughed.

"I'll give you props for aiming high." He adjusted the sleeve of his left arm. "But I'm not particularly interested in a demonstration of my talents right now."

"Was that a threat?" Hammer grinned. "I would love for it to be a threat."

"I'm sure you would." Tony cut in. "But Bucky has a date between my legs right now, so tottle off."

"Aww. You get wet just in my presence. How sweet."

Tony wiped some spilled scotch on his dress shirt. "Watching Bucky's shoulder muscles flex really does get me going. Athleticism and all that."

"How unexpectedly shallow."

Bucky stepped into his personal space, a chill enveloping the air around him. He pulled Hammer in before the other man could respond and kissed him none-too-gently. He didn't let go until Hammer had locked gazes with him. "Savour that. It's the closest you'll get to tasting Tony. I'm accommodating to your narcissism now, but you've outstayed your welcome."

"Are you threatening me?"

Bucky's voice dropped and his face went blank. "Yes."

Hammer immediately paled, going slack as Bucky straightened out his suit. Bucky's smile was ice cold.

"I'm glad we got this sorted out as gentlemen."
Hammer just nodded.

Tony snorted. "That was unnecessary."

"I don't care." He replied, unusually fervent. His gaze burned her and suddenly the hall had too many people, her dress too constricting, his body too far away. His voice switched to the rough gravel of his Russian accent. "There's not a soul who gets away with threatening you now. Not anyone."

She swallowed thickly, taking hold of his metal hand. "Now, now. Calm down. There isn't anyone I can't handle, that idiotic prick included. He couldn't get his hands around my neck with a guide and extra help." That got him to chuckle. "Right now, I've got a better use for you than ruminating on a possible assassination."

"And what would that be, my darling?"

She pulled him down my his collar, whispering something deliciously filthy in Ukrainian. His grin was at once scary and lecherous, her personal favourite expression second only to the one he got between her legs.

He slunk around to face her, pressing her into the bar despite their still frozen audience of Hammer. "You better call Pepper and let her know that you're not going to be going anywhere tomorrow."

"Is that so, Mr. Barnes?" She raised an eyebrow, taking another sip of her drink, Bucky chasing it with a kiss.

"Consider it a promise, Miss Stark." He purred back, pulling away and standing straight, casually adjusting his suit jacket. He completely ignored Hammer as he turned to the crowd. "If I were you, I wouldn't want to make me wait."

"What happens if I'm so inclined?"

His smirk was at once dangerous and disarming. "I've got all night, doll. But, with my mouth on you, will you?" One more step away and he vanished into the crowd.

She glanced over at Hammer, throwing back the last of her drink. "You think I can hide him underneath my skirts?"

He sputtered back to life. "Uhh, no? He's big."

She cocked her head, considering. "Balcony sex with a little added risk. Nifty." She set the glass on the bar and pushed off, herself disappearing into the mass of pompous bodies.

Hammer continued to stare at the spot where she had been for another good fifteen minutes, trying desperately to process what had just happened.

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Hammer screamed when he flicked the lights on in his kitchen/dining room. His maid would have gone home hours ago and locked the house behind her. She would have been gone before he even left the gala.

The Winter Soldier was sitting at his kitchen table.

"We know about Vanko." He said, voice rough and low. "I know everything you did for him, what you empowered him to do. I know of all your attempts to drug her."
He swallowed thickly.

"I know about all of your twisted plans to get her at your mercy and keep her under your thumb. She does not, but I do. Your prison sentence saved you, but should you move against her again, I will not be so kind. Am I clear?"

He swallowed again and found it caught in his throat, but he nodded rapidly anyway.

"Go shower and keep your distance from her."

He nodded again, rapidly retreating and almost running up his stairs, closing and locking the door to both his bedroom and the bathroom. Not that he thought it would stop the Winter Soldier if the man truly wanted him dead - the sinister gleam of the metal in the white light of his kitchen and the cold illumination of the moon spoke plenty to that. He didn't move from where he crouched in his tub until he screamed at the knock from his housekeeper.

The narrowing of her eyes told him she already knew the answer to the question. "Where'd you go?"

He stripped off his pants, throwing them on top of his jacket. They smelled like her now, not having bothered to shower after the gala and their little romp. "I had a meeting."

"In Hammer's kitchen?" She raised an unimpressed eyebrow.

"We had some things to talk over."

"Don't start doing this." She snapped with surprising vehemence that made him halt, all teasing flirtation disappearing. "Don't start going around fighting my battles for me. I won't stand for it, Barnes."

"Doll-"

"You go behind my back like that, I'll start keeping my dealings from you again."

He shut right up, becoming properly contrite. "Let me explain why and what I did?"

She crossed her arms, but nodded in assent.

"HYDRA knew he was after you. They sent me, several times, to look into and scope out his interest in you. I read dozens of schemes he had to overcome you, from having you assassinated to inducing Stockholm Syndrome. Even after you find out about his plot with Vanko and send him to prison, he still comes after you, no doubt stirring in resentment for the time he spent behind bars. I could tell he was never that brazen with you before. He doesn't fear you, doesn't believe he should. But he would take me seriously, under the right circumstance. I saw an opening to help you, to scare him into submission." His gaze didn't lift from the floor. "Don't hold it against me, doll."

She tsked. "Alright, but this is your one free pass."

"I promise, I'll tell you next time. You've got my word, doll."

She sighed, dropping her arms to pull him into a hug. "I'll accept it."

He tucked his face into her shoulder, nuzzling her closely. "You're not going to stop telling me things, are you?"
"No, I won't." She murmured against the flesh of his shoulder. "You're my Soldier. I can't do that."

"Want to join me in the shower?"

She snorted. "is that even a question?"

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Chapter End Notes

So I keep adding to this, but don't get your hopes up. I don't know if I'll keep consistently adding to it.

I mean, I don't know what I'm doing with my life, so how the hell am I supposed to know what I'm doing with a fanfiction.
I Couldn't Heal Myself With Time

Bucky remembered teaching the ballet classes in the Red Room. He recalled most of the training and a few of the faces. He never forgot Natasha's face, her grace, her rapt intelligence.

Natasha remembered Bucky - muzzled and dragging with exhaustion - standing on the other side of a dance studio teaching them stances in black lace ballet shoes and leather tactical pants, two guns and six knives strapped onto his thighs. He had always looked more dead to her than her regular instructors. But she also remembered someone who didn't accompany the Soldier.

Natasha was one of the few elite who ever seen the Engineer. A short, gaunt brunette with sharp, wary eyes and a kind of hawkish movement that had her frightening just to be around. She was what they had to fear, and the feeling had overwhelmed the studio that day - the first and last time she would see the Engineer inside the Red Room.

She had hurt herself and she could tell her performance suffered for it. The dark, sunken eyes of the young girl in black leather were glued to her. She seemed to be the second part of the Asset, his small handler, the ever-present and vengeful Midnight Engineer.

The Engineer called a halt to the practise, silently shushing the trainers, and stalked forwards, stopping in front of Romanova to gesture at her to follow. She did, too scared to question, and let the fellow youth lead her into another room.

"Your ankle is broken." The Engineer said, curt and lash-like.

"Yes." She replied. An apology would gain her no favours and she wasn't willing to learn about the personal sadistic tastes of the Engineer.

"Stand here." The Engineer commanded and she did so without question. She placed Romanova's hands on her shoulders and picked up her injured ankle. A quick snap and a searing lance of agony made her breath hitch. "Be gentle, but not ginger. Let the center of your ankle take your weight and do your best to keep your foot straight at all times. It will heal faster that way. In class, angle your heel in just a fraction. It will put more weight on the other ankle without costing you control or redistribute your weight."

When the Engineer stood, she felt more throbbing than pain in her ankle. She altered her technique and popped up onto her toes, twisting her foot just the slightest bit and immediately feeling the relief.

"Why?"

The Engineer's dark eyes made her immediately rethink her thoughtless query.

"Because you need help. Working with an injury is already difficult without punishment." What she mistook for fury and malevolence was actually restless terror and relentless torment. "Do what they ask of you. Do not fight them, do not surrender your agency to them. Don't break, but bend."

"This is almost treasonous."

Another, different unreadable glimmer passed through the pools. "Almost. The most important word."

Even after the documentary, it was hard to reconcile that dangerous adolescent with the charismatic
eccentric she knew from Stark Industries. The Midnight Engineer and Tony Stark are entirely different people. Despite seeing it, knowing it, she just couldn't frame them together in her mind.

Until the Avengers Relief Gala, two years after the Vienna bombing.

Distracted by an elderly Countess from England, neither Natasha or Bucky noticed until it was too late.

The documentary had been publically released, but not in its entirety. More editing had occurred at the behest of Pepper, who framed Tony as more of a victim than the woman herself did.

There had been a strong six month period where all Tony did was interviews. She had been on news reports, morning shows, late night comedy shows, celebrity news collabs, radio shows, everything. Her involvement in catastrophic events and slavery to the HYDRA agenda were anything but secret. Then she broke the news that she was in a relationship with Bucky and the tide began all over again. This time, he experienced a small fraction of the media circus with her. All different questions from his ability to have feelings to possible hypnosis to injections of conspiracy.

As it was for Natasha, many could not blend their image of her with the HYDRA killer she had been. And one could be allowed some leeway, watching Tony flutter through the social groups at the gala, gently pushing them to donate amidst artful small talk.

But too late, too late, she was cornered away from her guardian.

"Well, well. If it isn't Tony Stark." Senator Stern smiled, plastic and wrong. "It's been a long time, hasn't it?"

"Not long enough." She smiled back, shaking his hand. "What brings you here? Shouldn't you be legislating healthcare away from the poor?"

He laughed bitterly. "I think perhaps I should reopen the inquisition into the Iron Man armour, considering that you were an enemy of the state during our first entreaty."

"An enemy of the state?" She laughed, thick and dark. "I did HYDRA's work, yeah. I have this weird condition where I want to live. That said, I also know almost every secret they had. Of every member, consentual or otherwise."

Stern's smile fell some, sliding into a sneer before he could catch himself. "I've put up with a lot from you, Stark, in the name of cooperation. But you've gone and made an enemy of yourself, left yourself without a shield." He looked her over, cocking his head.

She gave her tightest, most sarcastic grin. "Raping me didn't deter me, Senator, so threatening to is just boring."

He scowled. "You don't know who you're messing with, Antonia."

She stepped up, facade falling away, but voice still hushed. "I'm the reason Pierce was killed. I'm the reason the Asset is free. I'm the reason INSIGHT never got off the ground. I'm the reason for all of your successes and all of your downfall. I killed the man who's seat you occupy in the Senate and I can sure as hell remove you as well."

"All you have left is the Asset."
She smirked, twisted. "He's the only part of the appartus that never failed. What you're pretending to hold is a network that fizzled away into nothingness the moment I introduced it to light. You wanna own me? Well, you can't have me."

"Is that so?" His sneer was dangerous and low. "You think I have nothing left after your little stunt? One head gets cut off, another grows back. You didn't kill us all and so we live on. You will lose."

"Don't throw bullshit pseudo-philosophy in my face." Her political smile returned. "You only know me by reputation, Senator."

"It's been a long time, Tony."

Stern stepped away to allow a tall man into their conversation. Stern had been stalling.

"Welcome to the Avengers Relief Gala, Mr. Stone. How fortunate you've been able to make it."

Stern smiled.

"Ty." She nodded, extending her hand to him. He took it, laughing.

"Still as rough as I remember. And the pantsuit - the boyishness in you just never breaks, huh?"

"Whatever lotion you use to masturbate has done wonders for your hands." She retorted.

He laughed, the jovality as false as its had always been. "I've missed you, Tony. Feeling up for a little fun tonight?"

"I'm with someone."

He glanced over his shoulder. Bucky was having an animated conversation in Russian with an ambassador, his metal hand perking out from under the hem of his tailored shirtsleeve.

"Right. You amnesiac fucktoy."

She forced herself not to react, keeping her composure. "You're quick to assess him."

"I dated you in MIT. I know exactly what a drugged up sex doll looks like." His eyes raked over her again.

"Hmm. I'm a little bit beyond your pedophillic age bracket now, as unfortunate as it is to have to pass up an opportunity to be left wanting and unsatisfied."

"That's no way to talk to me, sweetheart." His smile was gross. Stern was watching them raptly.
"Especially since you used to be so good"

"What can I say? Buck gave me a taste of life beyond restraint and I'm addicted."

"Is he so easily seduced as you were?"

"No." Her voice hardened.

"I wonder what reactions he could have if I took you in front of him?"

"You would find them unfortunate."

He leaned in, fingers reaching past her buttons to touch the cool metallic edge of the Reactor
"You know, Stane had the right idea all along. Pepper would make just as pretty a hole as you ever did. And I bet she's actually tight. Not to mention the whines I'd get to hear from your little puppy when he realizes his mistress isn't coming home."

"If you're not going to donate, help yourself to a scotch and leave."

He smirked and suddenly, two men had a hold of her arms, holding her, ready to drag her off. He turned to Stern.

"Pepper's all yours."

A tall man in a black suit skidded to a stop in the middle of the dance floor. A Senator turned to flee and was shot in the leg. One man in black body armour was unconscious and the other slumped to the floor with a satisfying crack to his nose. The sea of people swept apart around Tony as she stalked forwards, heels clicking ominously.

"Tony, babe, be reasonable." The man said, sitting up on his hands.

Tony didn't answer, her face an eerily blank capture of still thoughtfulness. She approached him methodically, steps measured.

"Tony-"

"No." Her cold voice echoed through the near-silent hall. "No talking."

Bucky shivered hard, programming rising to the surface like clockwork. Natasha glanced over at him critically, but was drawn back to Tony. The billionaire's Russian was sharp, efficient and cold.

"Tony-"

He tried to stand, but she slid into his lap gracefully, pushing him back onto the floor. She grabbed hold of his neck, steadying his head, before raising her dominant fist up to start punching. Immediately, he began to struggle, but her thighs tightened, her core flexing and placing more pressure on his throat and ribs, her punches increasing in number, frequency and ferocity. All the while, she breathed in rapid little pants through her nose, eyes void but clear, focused with all of her body, but barely thinking.

Bucky twitched helplessly at Natasha's side. He wished to join her, but he'd not been commanded or invited, therefore he could not. It made him whimper, like a dog locked out of its master's bedroom but knowing better than to scratch at the door. His metal hand flexed near-soundless with each blow, his other flinching when the crunching started.

Tony didn't stop once she draw blood, even when the man had stopped fighting her in earnest, due either to the asphyxiation or the dizziness the blows would induce. She didn't stop when she tore her own skin, as if she didn't even feel it.

"That's enough." Steve interjected, going to stop her before Bucky or Natasha had the chance to tell him it was a bad idea.

The supersoldier tried to pull her off my force, but Tony did not like being interrupted. She let the man go entirely only to flip herself around the Captain, catching his head between her thighs and throwing them around. She twisted enough to give herself leverage, getting him off balance and bent over backwards before she pulled down her weight and brought him to the ground. She kicked
him across the face for good measure - to daze more than injure - then scuttled right back atop the 
man, who had started to move again, slow and delerious. She was efficient to pin him once more, 
almost exactly the same position, before resuming her assault. He just kept whimpering, and she 
kept striking. Steve recovered relatively quickly, surprised that such ferocity was trapped inside 
their resident eccentric.

"We have to stop her." Bucky forced out, throat closed as the display of violence forced a change 
of persona inside of him. Natasha looked between them, concerned, but unknowing of what to do. 
Ironically, Tony was always the one who deflected and defused these kinds of situations. She 
stopped them from coming to violence, but here she was, snapped.

"Pepper." He forced again, face twitching as he resisted the urge to go blank. He was in control of 
himself, damnit. If he switched, it would be on his own terms.

Natasha took off with the suggestion, hastening her steps.

"Tony, stop!" Steve tried again, attempting a commanding boom to his voice. It rolled right off her, 
even going so far as to hit him harder to make her point. "Tony!"

She stopped punching him, then. Her body fell lax for a moment before her hands wrapped around 
his throat and she tensed all at once, white knuckles intent on wringing the life from him. There 
was single-minded devotion to her task written across the set of her face. He started to scratch at 
her arms again, weak but persistent. She picked his head up by the neck and slammed it once into 
the marble floor. His arms fell limp. Blood started to leak from underneath his hair, matting it and 
soaking into her fingernails.

"Tony!"

All at once, Tony stood, looming over the man - twice her size - like a monster. She returned to her 
own eyes as they landed on Pepper, the immobile black turning into molten obsidian once more.

"Pepper." She replied, voice still not quite her own. Natasha stood behind her, nervously looking 
around. Bucky was rigid with tension, tracking Tony like a hawk. If something happened in this 
instance, he would break and whoever dared to intrude would die.

"What the hell?!" Pepper was slightly hysterical, voice several octaves higher than normal. 
The hardness returned to her gaze, but not entirely. "I will not allow you to come to harm."

"What does that mean?" Pepper softened, approaching warily.

Tony sniffed and looked down at the unmoving man, putting her hands in her pockets and idly 
kicking his side pettily. Just like that, she was back to herself, dismissively looking around the 
room. "I'm not sure I'm interested in explaining myself in front of a crowd."

"I think everyone deserves to know what happened after that little display." Steve interjected. 
She flashed him a testy smile. "Don't push me, Rogers, or I'll put you on your ass again."


She looked back down at his barely-breathing body. "I'm not triggered by a lot. My job in HYDRA 
required me to have a level head and a steel heart. Escaping and outsmarting HYDRA required me 
be damn-near immune to mental torture and threats. But I've got all of three people in this world 
that matter to me. I've already failed Bucky, several times." She glanced meaningfully at Pepper.
"Rhodey can take care of himself most times, so I'll be hellbound before I ket anything happen to you."

"Oh, Tony . . . " She whispered, sadness overwhelming her. Pepper knew all about this. Her and Rhodes were the only ones she gave a whole and proper explanation to, a detailed analysis and report of the true extent of her time as the Midnight Engineer. This included the previously undiscovered combat training and the missions she was sent on with the Soldier, months-long expeditions that would leave cities in ruins and dynasties extinct. All the blood and horror that came with her hands.

"Okay, show's over!" Clint called, looking bored. "Clear out!"

Natasha looked at Tony differently when she seen her the next morning, careful bandages wrapped around her right hand and between her knuckles. She looked no different - an oversized shirt with loose jeans and a cup of coffee in her hand as she talked the schematics for a new Reactor through with JARVIS - but there was a realization attached to her now that only Bucky had before.

Tony wasn't the Midnight Engineer anymore, and the person standing in front of her was what Tony really looked like. But that did not mean the Midnight Engineer was not Tony. The Engineer lurked inside her the entire time, is a fraction of Tony that shaped her into who she was. The Engineer had everything to do with how she was able to be hard and stay soft inside, love and be loved while acting with no mercy and no regret. There's no way to tell where one ends and the other begins, but they were not actually the same.

There were two people that seen her in the Red Room - the deathly Engineer had stalked into the ballet studio, but it had been Tony who had helped her ankle.

Bucky walked into the kitchen, wrapping his arms around her waist and kissing her shoulder through the cloth, glancing at the holographic schematics.

It might never not be strange, being like this. Tony and Bucky with their real faces, Natasha with her own showing. She still felt like a child in the Red Room next to them, even now. The Engineer and the Soldier, a venerated force of destruction; Tony and Bucky, lost souls whose own gravity saved them from being lost in space. Natasha, somewhere in the particles created by their collision, was only happy she wound up on this side of them, shielded and protected by the from the beginning.

As irreparable and shattered as they were and would always be, she was grateful they had each other.
She stood, looking over the edge of the city.

Time had passed her by in a flurry of pain and broken bones, of dead men and silenced women. She was pushing forty-five now, in a few days' time. It didn't feel all that long ago, but a decade now stood between her and the last time she'd killed someone at HYDRA's behest. Less for him, but he wasn't as old.

"You look tired."

Natasha stopped at her side, handing her a cup of coffee.

"I am."

Natasha glanced at her, but didn't comment. "What are you thinking about?"

She sipped from the cup, considering for a long moment the best way to say everything and nothing.

"The past."

She stepped over the corpse, opening the door. He was over at the window, slipping in through the broken glass.

A terrified scream issued from the direction of the living room, followed by running feet in the silence. A child's snuffling escalated to full-blown sobs, then a young man's noise of panic and fear as a body hit the ground.

The woman, Mr. Castillo's wife, ran right into her, but had neither the time nor the skill necessary to react to a second assassin before the knife was thrust through the soft underside of her jaw and into her brain. The girl at her ankles cried harder. A thick gurgle and the eldest son fell lifeless.

The little girl was no more than a toddler, screaming and crying for help when there was none. Her father, mother and three older brothers were in pools of their own blood around her.

She knelt, placing her hands on either side of the girl's face, even as she began to struggle. It was a quick, abrupt twist followed by a hollow snap, and the girl fell too.

The silence of the aftermath was always a little haunting.

His eyes gleamed at her in the murk, shadowed by his mask and hair. She was much the same, her own eyes dark too.

"It's the mission." He told her, in Russian.
"I know." She replied.

They left the house together. It didn't matter where their boot prints lead, there was nothing to find. HYDRA didn't waste time on worthless assassins.

Burning down hospitals was an awful feeling, but the way the building burned was always beautiful. She wished it wasn't like this, but that was what it was. She had to wait.

"This is the right thing," He said, nudging her with his shoulder.

The cowering and shivering redhead pressed against the dumpster was below them and hadn't spotted them yet. Neither had the assassin with the bow and arrow. It was sloppy, but that was the whole reason SHIELD hadn't noticed HYDRA in its midst.

"Yes, it is. I want her to escape." She replied, leaning into him. Their arms pressed together, as much intimacy as these outings allowed. "I am simply sorry that she will be haunted by this."

He nodded.

"But then," She ruminated, "what is a phantom such as HYDRA if it does not leave you with ghosts?"

"I don't know."

"I didn't-" Natalia whimpered below them to Hawkeye. She'd had Natalia assigned to this mission specifically because he would be here - he would be sympathetic, would help her. "I didn't set the fire."

"But you were here for someone."

"I was, but it started to burn, already burning before I-"

He squinted at her in the darkness. "Fuck. You're a goddamn kid. Let's go. We'll find the arsonist another time. You're going to freeze."

Even a cell in a SHIELD prison was better than a cell in HYDRA's living quarters.

They died swiftly, soundless. Corpses left in a back room, dead from the moment they walked in the door. It didn't matter what their intentions had been.

The Soldier and the Engineer had come for them, and anyone who stood in between lay in a pool of their own blood. Dynasties were made off the backs of dead men, and history is made by those with forgotten names.

She returned to the party, slinking on the catwalk above, watching. He was outside, collecting the sniper rifle rounds.

She watched the oblivious below her laugh and mingle and drink, completely unaware that feet from them, the leaders of their government had holes in their skulls, that their wives and children and allies had breathed their last without pomp or circumstance minutes ago.

"Engineer." He called over their headset. He'd been wiped recently, more stiff and crooked than he usually was.
"How long will it take, I wonder?" She mused, quiet. "How will they find out? Who will notice they've gone first? Will it take a passerby to notice the blood seeping from under the door, or a gardener seeing the shattered window? Will it be a nosy voyeur, looking to peep in on a scandal or a reporter, seeking answers?"

"I don't know." He answered. "How did it happen last time?"

"I don't know either." She admitted. "I go back to the bunker with you and I don't get to leave until you're awake again."

He didn't respond.

"I wonder if they'll be missed." She mused again. "If any of these people will genuinely care that they're dead, aside from feeling their own necks. I wonder."

"I don't know." He said again. "We can't wait to find out."

She nodded even though he couldn't see her. "I know. But you and I both know what's coming."

"Yes. Soon, but not yet."

She took her briefcase with her knives and guns, and left through the front door.

She oversaw the development of HYDRA's kill teams. She also saw what they were trying to do.

They wanted to make their Asset an expendable one. He wasn't replaceable. The formula Zola had used was lost even to the scientist, what made it work on the Soldier and kill the other candidates.

And if she sabotaged them, if she killed more candidates than necessary or broke them in ways her own overseers could only dream, what of it? What could they do? Hurt her?

She ran them into the ground, made them confident in what they could do, deployed them to die and kept success out of their reach. They might be deadly, but she would not be unseated.

And if the other overseers of the program were found hanged in their own rooms? Perhaps they would learn the lesson she was now teaching them - do not make a weapon stronger than you can control. In a place like this, it was hard to discern exactly who had killed who for what purpose, but the longer she was around, the more of them died, the more things their grip fell shy of.

The more blood she had to scrub out from under her fingernails.

She gentled her fingers through his hair as he shivered, shaking off cryo. He laid against her, trying to breathe through the intense shakes.

She wasn't sorry for them. They were adults, most older than she, and they'd chosen this life. If they wished to die in service of their higher belief, she would not stop them. She would not indicate her intent, nor fulfill their ambition. They could die for HYDRA, and she would kill them for it. It was the weak ones she let live. Ones like Rumlow and his strike team, ones with softness that would shatter under more pressure. Rumlow was weak, unwilling to kill at random and idealistic. His men had physical strength, but there was little else. Not particularly adept fighters, not exceptional, except amongst their own mediocre peers.

Her own handlers were long since dead. The men and women dedicated to the forging of the Asset had been removed from play.
"Don't think I can't see what you're doing, Antonia." The Colonel said.

"Who do you have to replace me, sir?" She asked back. "There are plenty to replace you."

"You won't get to me as easily as the others."

She'd injected him this morning. He'd be dead the moment he fell asleep, suffering from sudden cardiac failure. His red face was already giving him away. "You don't have to worry. I won't be trying to kill you."

He went to smirk, then seemed to consider how vague that statement truly was. What plans were already in motion, she could see that he wondered, but it would be too late for him, even if he managed to figure out what she'd done. "There's no one who can replace me."

She met his gaze, helping the Soldier stand. He was still only semi-conscious, but his body moved to her command. She could guide him with little effort. He may not always recall her, but his skin and muscles did - her touch familiar and safe.

She didn't answer him until she walked into his room the next morning, finding him well within the grip of rigor mortis. "I can."

The elite fighting teams of HYDRA were less elite and more of a well-drilled soldier. The ones that survived knew that striving to be average would mean that they lived to make use of the training. The Engineer was rarely every physically present, assigned to the Asset as she was purported to be (if she was even real), but there were many of the best who vanished overnight. In Siberia, there was plenty of empty space to hide a body and nowhere anyone would want to look for one.

When the operations moved to the United States, it became more tricky. Washington was a city littered with filthy gangs and crime that went beyond Capital Hill.

She watched from monitors and bugs the movements of the troops. She kept the zealots in line, killed off the over-zealous and talented. She hid herself better than ever, bodies turning up in their beds unrecognizable and mangled. The downside was that there was no middle man, no distance that Pierce had to maintain to leash her. She was at his disposal here, and as much as she resented that, he was under her thumb too.

"You won't win this power struggle, Antonia."

She fastened on her mask, staring at him. Today, she was going to clear the way for Nick Fury to become Director of SHIELD. "We'll see, Alexander."

"It doesn't have to be like this. If you just let me lead you, you could have whatever you want."

"I want the Soldier. He's all I want." She blinked slow, methodical. She knew it unnerved him that she was entirely normal and moved like a supersoldier. "But he's the one thing you wouldn't give me. So we dance." She slung the rifle over her back - a Stark model modified to her own standards - and walked around Pierce as she might a concrete pillar.

She knew she looked bad, but she had no excuse to offer Pepper when her secretary worriedly fussed, so she said nothing.

When she made it to her room, she dry-heaved until the feeling of water in her lungs had gone and
dizziness from loss of oxygen had overtaken her. She let herself slump against the wall, Howard and Maria's slack faces playing on repeat even now. She wanted the Soldier. It didn't matter if Howard's brain matter was crusted in his knuckles, she wanted him here. But he was further from her reach now than ever.

She dragged herself to her bed and passed out. Pepper didn't disturb her, despite the very important meetings she was supposed to attend.

When she woke up, and gathered her things and quietly left her house. She found the home of Pierce's parents and staked them into the wall with the legs of his childhood dining room table. She debated killing his sister too, with her three children, but decided against it. Leverage and threat, after all, was the language of HYDRA.

She handed off the weapons to bin Laden, the Soldier hovering at her shoulder.

"We appreciate your kindness." He said, his English decent.

"We support your cause." She answered in Arabic.

They parted without further conversation and the Soldier followed her onto the plane. She sat down, exhaustion seeping into her very bones. He knelt in front of her, glassy-eyed but trying. She gently combed through his hair with her fingers, pulling their foreheads together to just rest peacefully.

"I love you." She said, bumping their mask-clad noses together softly.

He closed his eyes, leaning more heavily into her. Through the masks, he pressed their mouths together. His hands gripped her waist, pulling her closer.

"I'll save you, I promise." She breathed. "You just have to give me time."

He opened his eyes, staring into hers. "I trust you."

This was going to be a pain in the ass, because she had a gala to pretend to get drunk at in an hour and Pepper would be up her ass if she didn't make it at least fashionably late.

She shucked off the bloodied and sweat-sticking leather, trying not to flick her hair around. It was soaked in blood from root to tip and was goign to take a couple washes to get out. Two hands, one cold and one hot, caressed her sides as they helped her pull off the armour.

"You're here." She breathed, trying to contain her excitement in case they'd wiped him again.

"I am." His voice was clear and less Russian, so probably not.

She turned around to face him, getting a faint smile in return. "What did they send you for?"

"To send a message. That I'm watching you now and if you misstep, I'm to kill you."

"But you won't."

"I won't." He confirmed.

"Join me?" The offer was out before she could think about it. She was only ever this honest with him.
He seemed taken aback, but began to shed his own gear as well, separate from hers.

She spent the night wrapped in the arms of her Soldier instead of attending the gala as promised. She got an hour-long lecture for it, but the bruises on her thighs from his metal hand were a sufficient distraction.

She knew something was wrong, but she didn't know that. Obadiah likely would have fooled anyone else with his behaviour, but she knew he was anticipating something huge, waiting for something to happen, and she had the sinking suspicion that it involved her death.

So she let the plan go through. She dodged the bullets and was preparing to kill off the attackers when the bomb landed next to her, something she had no defense against.

When she woke up to being filmed, she confirmed her hypothesis. Obadiah had been trying to kill her, but now these people knew who the target was and wanted more. She planned on giving it to them.

She anticipated that SHIELD would eventually send someone to monitor her since Iron Man, but she'd been pleasantly surprised to find it was Natalia.

She googled the alias, Natalie Rushman, and was quite pleased with how expansive the cover story was. She'd trained Natalia well. The perfect ballerina. Better the enemy you know, in her opinion, but then, she was still trying to find a nice way to kill Pierce. So maybe she was wrong. Unlikely, but possible.

She was thinking about that when she watched the reel that Howard left behind for her to find, to find the elemental makeup of Starkium. The tender look on his face, the loss captured in his eyes. She hated watching it every second of it.

How much different would her life have been, would the world be, if HYDRA had never succeeded in kidnapping her?

She didn't have time to dwell on it.

Rogers.

The way he spoke down to her on the helicarrier rankled her in a way few managed. She considered killing him, very seriously, but opted out of it in the end. She could use him yet. SHIELD wasn't going to bring itself down, after all.

"Do you remember me, from the Red Room?" Natasha asked.

She took another sip. "I remember everybody."

"How? You had to have seen thousands of people pass through just the Red Room alone."

"Eidetic memory."

"Oh." Natasha looked down. "I'm sorry."

"Don't be." She offered a tired smile. "That's how it happens, sometimes."
"I can't imagine how hard it was for you."

"Don't feel too much sympathy for me." She stepped back from the railing. "I'm no angel in this either."

She left Natasha to ruminate on that wondering, not for the first time, if she should tell the former assassin exactly what had happened and why. But then, it was possible Natasha would feel even more guilt and regret than she already did.

She collapsed onto Bucky when she reached her room.

"You smell like bourbon." He hummed.

"Just for you." She mumbled into his chest.

"Thinking about the hospital fire?"

"I'm thinking about all of it."

He stroked her hair. "You'd know better than I would if it gets better."

"It does and it doesn't." She admitted. "Nothing is ever going to save me from these memories."

"I know." He replied.

"I love you."

"I love you too."

She pushed herself up enough to smile at him. "Always."

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