Tell Me Who Your Friends Are (And I'll Tell You Who You Are)

by sian1359

Summary

Several months have passed since Natasha became one of Fury's Furies. Surprisingly, the squad's newest case is helping her finally begin to feel like she is fitting in.

Notes

This is the second story in the series; the first isn't not yet written. If you seen the series called The Unusuals, you should have a basic idea of what will happens once it does get written (there are also references to what happened to fill you in).

Auburnnothenna once again handled the majority of the edits -- before some final tweaking. Himself vetted most of the science, but this is still fiction based more or less on super heroes.

- Inspired by Welcome To The Jungle - An Avengers/Unusuals Fusion Fanmix by hiddencait
Second Squad, this is dispatch. Be on the lookout for kids flashing laser pointers at motorists. We’ve had multiple reports of drivers being temporarily blinded. When asked to describe their attackers, unfortunately, they could not provide descriptions. Remember, it's only funny until someone gets their retina burned out.

Natasha didn't care that it was 2:00 a.m. Or that she'd just slammed her car door shut loud enough to set dogs barking and nearby alarms wailing. In her mind, if she had to be up at this time of night, so should everyone else. Especially her stupid-ass partner! Who'd left his goddamn phone turned off, or drained out, or whatever. So he hadn't answered Fury's call. So Fury had called her, pulling out of her first opportunity to wipe away the memories of the last week by slipping into her bathtub. Her first opportunity to experience something other than the spotty showers in the locker room or washing up at sinks that had been her only recourse for much too long.

Her plan had been the bath with a little music and a glass of wine, then sleeping for at least a full day, only getting up to eat, piss, and change the batteries if she had needed to – assuming she couldn't convince James to come join her. Phil had promised them the next three days off for having just come off a week of double and triple shifts, for having not gone home at all during the last seventy-two hours. Because she and Clint had caught no more than an hour or two here and there on the cots in the old storage area in the back of the station house, and brief catnaps during their stakeouts while the other kept watch.

The LT had promised, only their captain hadn't been around for two weeks, had been off handling some One Police Plaza bullshit on sensitivity and diversity training and, therefore, hadn't gotten the memo on her authorized time off. He needed her… them. So he called, regardless of the time. And when Nicholas J. Fury called, they answered. Or they better be dead.

Such was the life of a detective of the A-Squad in the Second Precinct, of being one of Fury’s Furies, as some fellow cops called them – or one of Fury's Fuck-ups as they were known by to the rest. Natasha had been one of them for six months now and still wasn't sure herself which was the more accurate designation.

Or where her partner fell within that scale of zero to hero.

On the one hand, Clinton Francis Barton had the highest conviction rate in their Squad. He was intuitive as well as relentless, seemingly able to reconstruct what had happened at a crime scene within in his head long before the forensics confirmed his speculations. On the other hand, he was also childish and a smart ass, never knowing when to keep his mouth shut with the Brass, as well as challenging other cops to stupid competitions such as milk chugging and the saltine cracker challenge. (At least he hadn't been fool enough to accept the cinnamon challenge posed in return, given the dangers it posed.)

Then there was his weird tolerance when it came to certain skels and street people, though at least Clint seemed to be able to pick out the scammers from those who truly had need and were harmless. He had the odd habit of admiring some of the criminals they chased, the clever ones that broke the law with panache and finesse instead of exercises in brutality. Sometimes Natasha thought she understood that part; taking down the clever ones and thereby proving she was better than them did provide a certain satisfaction.

What she didn't understand was Clint's stupid diner slash home. Carson's Café. Sure, he owned it free and clear (having inherited it from someone he'd busted a few times while a uni), which was certainly worth something in Manhattan. But he was a cop not a cook, and holding onto something – paying taxes on something – that he mostly ignored did not make sense to Natasha. From what she'd seen, Clint only opened its doors to the public when he felt like it and he never served from a menu. (Instead he made available whatever meal he'd decided he wanted for
himself, because he had a habit of cooking for no less than ten people at a time.)

She suspected most of the 'customers' were neighbors; the kids who didn't have parents around to make sure they got at least one decent meal a day and, okay, she could understand him doing that, along with him accepting favors as the price for the meals instead of money. Of the other who seemed to frequent Carson's when Natasha was around, they were often students who seemed to wait and call one another once they saw the purple neon 'Open' sign as if it had become something of a cachet, being around at the right time to get served one of those meals as Clint was a damn fine cook. Much to her amusement, Clint usually seemed embarrassed by the fuss instead of pleased for the business.

Natasha was not so amused now. Having had to park a couple of blocks down the street, she was now cold as well as tired by the time she was in front of the neon flickering 'Closed' amidst the snowflakes of an early seasonal storm. Cos d, actually, as two of the letters were burned out, just as it had been when she'd first been brought here to meet Clint.

That had been at Nick Fury's behest too, though he'd been with her then instead of sending her on alone. Fury had poached her from a working detail for Vice, his need to determine if the murder of one of his detectives had been the result of dirty dealings and whether he had a further corrupt house taking precedent over her investigation into allegations of coercion and assaults by cops against some of the working girls. At the time, Natasha had figured she'd be in and out, that it would be just another undercover op and that she'd be back working for the Internal Affairs Bureau once Eric Selvig's killer had been identified. She certainly hadn't expected to be offered a place permanently. Nor that she would be willing to accept such a position – and a partner.

This partner. Who wasn't superstitious about living in a place where so many had died in a violent shoot out, because he already lived with the ghosts of his childhood.

Natasha made her own silent greeting to the ghosts as she unlocked the front door, entering quietly out of habit. The ghosts of Buck Chisholm and the opposing gang members he'd lured into the diner in an attempt to try and clean up the neighborhood that had accepted him didn't bother her anymore than they did Clint, but she still needed to suppress a shiver as she caught sight of the newer furrows in the wall that Clint had obviously decided not to repair. Those furrows came during another shoot out, only four months past, when Loki Laufeyson had stalked Clint and ended up shooting Phil instead.

Sneaking up on her partner so soon after that was not a good idea. Neither did she want to turn on the diner's lights, though, potentially attracting outside attention. She'd need to make noise, but not the type that might imply a break in –

Well, maybe she'd have to turn on the downstairs lights after all.

From the outside she had evidence of a light still burning upstairs, though one muted as if a flickering television forgotten or ignored in the otherwise dark. While she had learned many things about her new partner in the six months they'd been working together (including the accidental discovery that he slept without blankets and that other clothing might also be optional, something she did not want a repeat of on this night), she didn't know whether eating or getting rid of the grime after a long messy case mattered more than sleep as it did in her case.

Hearing distinctive noises coming from the loft, she discovered his decompression routine didn't involve any of those options. And that she'd have to be creative in making her own presence known. Or resigned to be voyeuristic again. And interrupting.

The enthusiasm of the activities going on over her head gave her pause, and not just because she wondered where Clint had found the stamina. It certainly explained why he hadn't answered his
phone, but she was still curious as to why Fury had called her to track down her wayward partner instead of calling Phil first – as Clint's supervisor or his lover. (Fury didn't officially acknowledge the off-the-clock relationship between the two in order to keep the Brass out of it, but it wasn't like he didn't know.) Because he was the squad's supervisor, Phil never let his phone's charge run down, nor failed to answer it, even if doing so interrupted a good fucking. That Fury hadn't, meant that this call out was for her and Clint only, behind the back of his one good eye, as Fury sometimes referred to Phil.

And for Fury not to bring Phil in on it, it meant it was personal. Natasha didn't want personal. The last time that had happened, Selvig had been murdered, Clint had been a suspect, and she'd been brought over to sort it out. Not to mention Phil had ended up shot and nearly killed, and Thor had had to arrest – and shoot – his favorite cousin. Personal was bad.

Even more so if it involved someone from her past.

If it wasn't personal, then it was disciplinary. No better, of course, yet even then, unless it involved handcuffs, disciplinary could have waited until their next shift.

Natasha was pretty sure neither of them had done anything deserving a slap on the wrist – or a slap of handcuffs. On the job, they just didn't screw up, and outside of it, Fury already knew their secrets that might violate departmental rules and regs. Like everything behind the Loki mess, her dating ADA Barnes, Clint and Phil's big gay love….

Knowing she'd only give herself a headache if she tried to figure it out on so little sleep (not that she didn't already have one), Natasha put it more or less out of her mind as she removed her coat and hung it over one of the stools at the counter next to Clint's leather jacket. Phil's own coat, no doubt, had been taken upstairs to hang properly in the antique armoire she'd helped Clint find two weeks into their partnership. Glad that her partner had someone, she was happy too that it was Phil, as they both deserved one another no matter how she might interpret that thought.

She decided she'd take a leaf our of their book – seeing James was more important than a day of sleep and lounging – and made herself a promise to call him once she knew what Fury was about. Unless he had court, she had no doubts about being able to convince him to play hooky. She'd have to stay awake long enough to do any of that, however.

That thought had her ducking behind the counter and pulling down the sealed tub of coffee beans from the cupboard next to the stove to pour into the top of the line grinder. Coffee wasn't her drink of choice, for a headache or as a pick me up, but it was the one thing, sometimes the only thing, she could always count on finding here in good supply. This time she had a feeling she'd need a gallon of it before she finally saw her bed. She also figured that between her banging around the cupboards and the rising aroma of a fresh brewed pot, the two men up above her would figure out that they were no longer alone and would finish up without her actually having to interrupt them at an obviously inopportune time.

(At least neither of them was particularly wordy when they fucked, no breathless pleadings to each other or to a god none of them believed in. Clint was, however, shameless and could be counted on to occasionally play to a crowd, though she doubted the bed frame banging against the wall was anything beyond normal. It made a nice counter beat to the throbbing in her head.)

Just as she was ready to pour, she heard footsteps on the stairs going from the diner's back kitchen and pantry to the loft, a particular squeak that you had to go out of your way to press. Knowing they would have already checked the camera remotes Clint had installed down here after his and Loki's shootout (so there would be no more stray bullets catching someone unaware that they were walking down into confrontation), Natasha simply continued with her preparations. Knowing, too, that the squeak was a warning for her that one of them was coming down (since
She handled being snuck up on as badly as Clint).

She wasn't sure which of them she expected first. She supposed it could be both, as neither were the type to make noise otherwise for her to be able to discern, but then she heard the shower running and gave a moments thanks for their consideration. Smelling sex on someone was all fine and good under the right circumstances, but not with her too early morning (still the night before) coffee aroma.

"Are you having trouble sleeping, Tasha?" Phil asked her as he came through the kitchen and into the diner proper, looking rakishly disheveled in one of Clint's t-shirts and a pair of obviously his own old sweatpants (going by the faded Army logo down a pant leg), his hair at best finger-combed. He flicked just one of the lights on so they had a little more visibility than just the streetlights and neon coming through the front window, but not making it so obvious that people were moving around inside.

That was one of the things she most liked about Phil. He didn't come down asking why she'd interrupted them. He also hadn't panicked and assumed the worst about her arrival, had instead inquired after her calmly as well as immediately offering his support. Phil was a nurturer in pop psych parlance, always looking out for the people around him, both in caretaking and in keeping them in line.

She shook her head to his question and started pouring two more cups. "Fury's back at the precinct and was looking for Clint. And me," she added, fixing both of the other cups without even thinking about the oddity in knowing how each of them took their coffee. She'd been with IAB for five years and had never fixed someone there a cup of coffee; much less knew their preferences in how they drank it.

"He needs us to come in for something. After I bitched him out, I told him we'd be there within an hour. Clint's phone is – "

"Currently in evidence lock-up," Phil reminded her, the tiny lines appearing around his eyes that said he was amused at her expense though he'd never be so inconsiderate to actually laugh at or make fun of her.

Natasha blushed and handed over his cup. "Right. I forgot. He threw his phone at O'Malley and broke the fucker's nose."

"Thereby also breaking O'Malley's concentration so that you could do your funky spider jump on his back and bring him down without the hostages or any of us getting shot," Clint completed the sequence of what had happened three scant hours ago as he glided into the diner, damp hair dripping on his Henley. "Are we doing a debriefing now? I thought we were going to wait until tomorrow over lunch."

Though he and Phil had just finished having sex no more than five minutes ago, Clint immediately came over to stand in front of Phil so the two could exchange a kiss that really made Natasha want to call James now and fuck waiting until her lover would normally be getting up. She drank more of her coffee instead, then threw the spoon she'd stirred it with at Clint's head. He caught it without breaking the kiss or even looking her direction.

Phil was nicer, though, that nurturing thing again (or just as likely his natural reticence over PDAs), not that either of them were shy around her anymore. He pulled away with a small show of reluctance, saying something that had Clint blushing just enough that his ears turned pink, before he turned to Natasha with something of an apology and curiosity in his expression.

"If it's a debriefing, it's at headquarters," she filled him in. "Fury sent me to pick you up."
"Why didn't he call – Oh, that's why the whereabouts of my phone came up." Clint interrupted himself and gave a small shrug, then a small, sheepish smile before stealing Phil's cup and finishing it in one go.

Natasha simply rolled her eyes and handed the second cup to Phil as she had the first; while they preferred it quite differently from one another in the milk versus sugar vein, they still were forever stealing each other's coffee.

It was cute, in the wanting to spork her eyes out sense.

"Why don't I drive," Phil offered and lifted his hand when both she and Clint would protest.

"I'll get a start on the O'Malley paperwork while you're meeting with Nick, then we can all go out and get breakfast."

"Hey, I can cook us breakfast," Clint protested.

"You haven't been here in almost two weeks," Natasha felt obligated to point out, although she loved Clint's cooking. "It's a good thing Phil prefers the non dairy creamers, as the coffee is probably the only thing unspoiled on hand."

She also didn't want him to have to bother. While she doubted he'd ever fall asleep while standing over a hot stove, he could still make a mistake, stumble or drop something and go to catch it without thinking and thereby hurt himself. Wasn't worth it when they had innumerable, tasty options near the precinct, even at this early hour.

Natasha also was curious to see whether Fury would join them if they did go out to eat. The likelihood of him saying yes would be greater if Phil was the one doing the asking. One day she'd get the story between those two; she knew their relationship went back further than the NYPD, but she'd never been able to find a Nicholas J. Fury listed in any US military records at all, much less one coinciding with Phil's stint as an Army Ranger.

Protests and concerns aside, ultimately they went along with Phil's suggestion, because that's pretty much what they always did. He was their LT, their steady rock, the calm voice in their ears during a takedown or standoff that never offered panic or bullshit. He also had the bigger car, one roomy and comfortable enough for all three of them to sit together up front.

While he went up to change and retrieve his keys and coat, Clint found an old thermos and started filling it up with the rest of the coffee. Natasha moved around him to gather the finished cups then into the back and the sink to rinse them out. Neither of them felt the need to fill the silence with speculation over the call out or even small talk, but it wasn't more than a couple of minutes before Phil was coming back down anyway. This time he'd put on a very nice fisherman's sweater and slacks, holding his coat and also a hoodie for Clint to add over what was little more than a long-sleeve t-shirt tucked into a worn pair of jeans, since his leather jacket alone wouldn't be much protection against the snow still falling beyond the diner's window.

All the weathermen had agreed there would be an unseasonably early nor'easter blowing in within the week, but right now the snow was almost pleasant, bringing a quiet and purity to the streets that reminded Natasha a little of home. For an instant it was all fairy lights and colors reminiscent of St. Basil's Cathedral, just like the snow globe she'd managed to keep hold of throughout the years of her exile.

She watched her breath become visible in the crisp air, watched too as Clint threatened the back of Phil's neck with a handful of the snow only to somehow have his hand turned and he ended up wearing the snow himself (although she'd been watching – closely – Natasha still wasn't sure how
Phil had managed it). Clint simply laughed and warmed his icy chin by shoving it into Phil's neck for a moment's cuddle and kiss. Then the two of them turned and held their hands out, leaving Natasha little choice but to let them drag her in between the two of them while they walked down the block to where Phil had needed to park.

Not that she was objecting. While she would always think of Russia as her home, she had no family there, no reason, really, to ever want to go back for anything other than a visit. She was too pragmatic to have regrets, was a US citizen now, and had made herself a new home. That she might also be making herself a new family was still a strange and fragile thought, but one she would hold onto as tightly as she clutched at the men next to her when Clint decided there was enough ice to skate them along the sidewalk instead of walk.

Nor did it matter when Clint was proven wrong and he flailed with all the grace of a scalded cat while she and Phil laughed.

"Look, it wasn't my idea and I certainly did not recommend you two, but One PP has got it in their fool heads that your partnership is a role-model for gender equality so they're insisting you come down and participate in setting up the next round of departmental sensitivity training."

Despite his eye patch, Fury could be remarkably expressive, though this time it was mostly in his tone, his growing exasperation mirrored by the expression on Clint's face. That was something of a consolation, Natasha supposed, that Fury thought it was just as much a waste of time as they did. Not that she was so poorly trained to give away her own feelings on the matter; she wasn't ready to trust Nick Fury that much when he could just as readily transfer her out of his squad as he had brought her in.

"I know this is supposed to be the start of a few days off and you're coming off a hellish week, but my hands are tied. Which means your hands are tied," Fury further growled out. "So you'll go downtown for an hour, two at the most, and talk about why your partnership works, answering all of their stupid questions, then resume your long weekend."

"What do we get in return?" Clint had the temerity to ask.

Fury glared. "For one, you don't get my boot up your ass, Detective." But he sat back and looked, if not as exhausted as they were, at least put out in his own right, and not because of Clint. Even for Fury, dealing with the Police Commissioner and all of his civilian deputy directors was a chore before, without having to go through all the touchy-feely bullshit methodology being brought in by the new civilian commissions. (As if they better understood what it meant to be a cop and had all the answers to thousands of years of oppression, inequality and distrust between all the sexes, races, and religions that would always fester between the inhabitants of Manhattan.)

"If you manage to pull it off," Fury continued, his fingers steepling together over his stomach, "I'll let you skip the next in-house diversity seminar and make Stark and Rogers take the lead, along with GW Bridge down in Homicide. Plus, I'll give you until Monday afternoon to finish your reports on O'Malley and company."

"Phil's already filling those out," Clint started.

Fury's look was not sympathetic. Gleeful, actually, if Natasha had to chose. She hid her own smile.

"Then it sounds like you're going to owe him a favor in addition to the one you owe me."
While all too often Clint didn't know when to shut up for his own good, Natasha had a feeling this whole exchange was something more than his complaining and Fury shutting him down. Suddenly it came to her, the slowness of her getting it excused only because of her exhaustion. This was for her benefit. Since first hearing their assignment, she'd clutched at the arms of her chair hard enough to numb her fingers. Only now, without realizing it, she'd finally relaxed back within her own chair and was trying to keep from laughing.

Those two were very, very good.

It wasn't fear, of course. Not of public speaking or of standing out when others preferred to stay below the radar. Natasha Romanova didn't do fear, and she'd always been noticed, for good and for ill. Still, this type of assignment did make her uncomfortable; half of the people she'd be facing down at One PP distrusted her, while many of the others simply disliked her. Because she was an immigrant or because she was a woman and better at her job than they were at theirs... take your pick. Because during her time with Internal Affairs, she'd been the one who the IAB bosses sent in to put other people's houses in order. Because, thanks to their weaknesses and her investigative and interrogative skills, a significant number of cops had lost their jobs, and not just the corrupt idiots and thugs amongst the rank and file, but a few of the Upper Brass too. Deputies and commissioners who'd then been replaced by civilians instead of by someone who'd come up through the ranks and maybe deserved the promotion.

"Hey, don't stress so much," Clint told her with a squeeze to the hand he forcibly pried from the wood she again gripped with ferocity. "We'll make it a party."

She turned on him, unable to keep the incredulity from her expression or tone. "I don't see how this will be a party."

Second Squad, this is dispatch. All units, be advised that there has been another fabric store robbery, the third this month. If you happen to find the roll of black leather which has been taken along with the green bolts as reported, remember that I'm a size twelve, so I'll need at least five yards to make a decent Matrix-style trench like Captain Fury's.

"We really need to hook Darcy up with Steve," Natasha said as Darcy's voice faded out on their R/T.

Clint gave a quick glance her direction before returning his attention to the moderately heavily trafficked street ahead of them. "Why, because Steve has a thing for trench coats? Fury would be easier."

"Wait, you're serious?" he asked when she gave him nothing but silence. "Darcy would eat Steve alive."

"Exactly."

Natasha made sure to add the proper amount of smugness to her tone, which earned her yet another look, one incredulous this time instead of mocking, before Clint returned his attention to the traffic and the cab brazenly cutting them off.

"Darcy deserves to be with someone nice after the way Loki used her, and if anyone needs a little of Darcy's irreverence and good, dirty fun, it's our All-American Boy, Steve Rogers. And who else is there?" she asked him. "I've got James, you're with Phil and we're all sick of seeing the cooing between Thor and Jane, while Pepper's still putting up with Tony. That leaves only Bruce or Fury, unless we go outside the squad. Everyone knows Fury is married to his badge, while I'm
pretty sure that Bruce is asexual."

Clint was nodding at that as he maneuvered their sedan around the same cab beating out another for a fare off on the right side of the road. "Actually, I think Bruce is hung up on Betty over in the Crime Scene Unit," he offered, obviously not as reluctantly drawn to the idea not as he'd have her believe. Or at least drawn to gossiping.

"Plus, Tony is already jealous that Bruce is Steve's work partner instead of his. It wouldn't go well if Steve and Bruce became partners outside the squad too. But have you considered that Steve might prefer someone not connected to the job? Wasn't there a cellist he'd asked out once? Peggy something?"

"Margaret Carter, who is first chair for the Philharmonic, you philistine," Natasha corrected him. "And you said it yourself, he asked her out once, pretty much right as I joined the Furies. They haven't seen each other since. Either there was no spark, or Steve is simply too shy to pursue her, especially after he found out she and Phil were once engaged. Personally, I think Steve's stuck on the bro code of not going out with a friend's ex, even though it's been over for years. Phil was the one who'd introduced them after all. And, not to mention, that Phil is with you now."

Clint hit the brakes a little harder than was his normal wont at the next light. As if that was the reason for the little yelp he let out when their seatbelts pulled them snug.

Natasha laughed at him and punched him in the arm. "Please, like Phil's going to throw you over to go back to a smart, self-assured, leggy blonde who makes twice the money you do," she teased him.

"You are a bitch, Natasha," he growled at her.

"And you're an idiot if you don't see how much you mean to Phil," she told him soft and solemnly. "Phil practically lives with you, Clint. He makes the journey regularly over to your skiffy diner loft and stays the night, despite him having a far nicer place over in Cobble Hill. He keeps half of his wardrobe commingled with yours, not to mention the DVDs and him bringing over his knifefish to live with your Siamese fighting fish. He is willing to risk his job to be with you – "

"Fury would never let Phil go – "

"Fury won't have the choice if it becomes a contention point with One PP, Clint," she interrupted right back. "Phil is the senior officer, so he would have to take the hit in order to make sure the NYPD doesn't have to pay out on another sexual harassment lawsuit. I'll agree with you, though, that Fury would be pissed enough at you if he ends up having to let Phil go that he might also transfer your ass."

Clint's said nothing though his lips thinned and his hands tightened on the steering wheel.

Natasha frowned. He had to know that; there was no way Phil wouldn't have brought up the risks inherent to the relationship.

She put her hand over his and squeezed gently. "Clint, even if you are sometimes an idiot, we both know that Phil isn't. One PP isn't going to find out, and if they do, well, I'm sure Fury will fight for the two of you. It's not like you haven't already proven you can handle yourselves if something happens to compromise your objectivity…"

Not that reminding him of the Loki mess was any better at keeping Clint from wallowing in his insecurities. Still, he nodded, slowly, his shoulders relaxing though he still had a white knuckle
grip on the steering wheel despite him having parked them at the precinct.

She shook her head and tried not to smile at his foolishness.

"So, maybe we should work on getting Steve and Margaret to try again," Clint said as they both exited the car cautiously, mindful of the slush that was piled up along the curb.

She waited to continue once they headed up the stairs into the station house, letting him hold the door for her because he sometimes needed to do things like that. Clint kept getting the doors for her as they headed up (no elevators for them unless one of them were injured), and she kept letting him. She also let him help her out of her coat and said yes when he offered to make her tea when they stopped off at the break room before heading into the squad room.

"Do you think he would consider dating her and Darcy both? Frankly, the love child between the two of them would be absolutely perfect for – "

"Love child? Who is having a love child? What has Tony Stark missed?"

The boat, your sanity, most likely the toilet bowl in the middle of the night came immediately to mind, but Natasha kept those thoughts silent, basically ignoring Tony as he walked in on them. She accepted the mug of tea Clint handed her and took a sip. It was barely passable, but still better than the coffee.

"Are you saying you and good old Bucky have a bun in the oven – "

Natasha spun and closed in on Tony, getting right up against him so that they'd share the same breath. If Tony could draw one in from his sudden stuttering.

"Stop calling James, Bucky," she hissed. "That's Steve's nickname for him, something that's just for the two of them, not you."

Tony took an involuntary step back, but then let a smirk come over his expression while he gathered his wits and his courage.

"One more thing," she warned him with a blank look and a flat tone before he could come up with some sort of witty rejoinder, "if I hear one rumor about being pregnant from anyone, Stark, I will make sure you will never get such a chance." She now held her mug low enough, close enough, that Tony could no doubt feel the heat of the tea through the zipper of his thousand dollar pants.

For a second she saw real fear in his eyes and was content. Second later, Clint cleared his throat and called her back from her contemplation on how many ways she could make Tony Stark hurt. Called her back to New York, to America, to a job and situation where she didn't have to defend herself or her reputation quite so vigorously. She suppressed her flush, but still lowered her eyes as she raised her mug and took a reluctant step back.

Only to have Clint move into the space she just vacated, close enough to kiss Tony if he was so inclined. To offer his own warning as it turned out.

"I'd second her warning, that you better not start any rumors to the contrary, but I know you're not that much of an asshole," Clint told him with a cruel smile and fake geniality. "We both know that Pepper wouldn't deign to even speak to someone that much of an asshole, much less be engaged to him."

Natasha didn't bother hiding her own smirk, not offended by her partner stepping in although she could certainly take care of herself; Clint's threat was better than hers.
It had been quite awkward – and hilarious – to find out that Clint had known Pepper Potts before Tony had introduced her to the squad as his fiancée. That Clint had known her from before Tony had started dating her, Clint having been a recipient of some of the Maria Stark Foundation's efforts and money many years ago. While Pepper hadn't been the foundation's head back in 1987 (or during Clint's participation in 88’s Summer Olympics, Men's Individual, Gold Medal, archery), her rise within the Foundation had come about during the same time Clint was able to begin supporting their works in turn and become a steadfast and generous donor.

The awkwardness was still there on Tony's part, from his jealousy (not that he doubted Pepper – or Clint – would be unfaithful, but because Tony had never learned to share), and for a second he looked like he'd respond with something scathing. Clint's own expression changed to an out right dare that Tony give it his best shot. Natasha merely rolled her eyes as it turned to male posturing.

Then Tony surprised her by backing down, by swallowing his defensive counterattack and instead giving them the billion dollar grin that regularly graced the financial and local magazines and papers (except the Daily News – they hated Tony) while Tony stood alongside the Mayor, the Governor or one of New York's US senators (Tony thought the other was a dick). It was the grin of Gotham Magazine's Most Eligible Bachelor edition for ten straight years (despite how often he was also photographed kissing Pepper), the one that reminded them that Tony Stark could buy and sell the lot of them a thousand times over and that nothing could touch him.

Given that Natasha knew a little too much about the reason that smile had first come about from when she'd needed investigate all of the squad's background and secrets, she forced her own body language to soften. "If you must know, Clint and I were talking about getting Steve a date." She made it sound off-handed, a way of making peace without calling attention to such intentions and making someone feel even further defensive. Tony as well as Clint relaxed their own stances and moved away from one another, though Tony was shaking his head.

"It won't work. Our esteemed colleague is saving himself for marriage," Tony disputed her proposal as he strode further into the room to collect his own coffee. That he poured into a thermos instead of a cup. Then set the pot back, empty, though at least he had enough manners to turn the burner off so the pot wouldn't shatter.

"Not everyone has sex on the first date, Tony," Clint chided. He moved over next to Tony and began gathering up the supplies to make a new pot without seeming to realize he was doing so.

Tony watched for a second, then turned and winked at Natasha.

"Then not everyone isn't doing it right," he pointed out while Clint – and Natasha – just shook their heads.

Engaged or not, Tony had been a playboy for too many years not to have very definite opinions on dating. Along with the experience to back up his many hypotheses.

He suddenly turned wide eyes back in Clint's direction. "Are you telling Tony Stark that you and your g-man are not engaging in the horizontal mambo?" he asked, sounding completely scandalized. "What's the point of getting on with the gay if you're not having sex – "

It was Clint's turn to turn on him. "Jesus, do you even listen to yourself?"

"All of the time," Tony retorted, a devilish grin lighting his eyes. "Tony Stark is the most intelligent person in any room that doesn't have Brucie baby in it." He laughed put both of his arms around Clint and Natasha's shoulders, starting to push them out the door now that they all had their late morning pick-me-ups.
"Do g-men wear g-strings?" Because Tony was nothing if not outrageous.

And genuinely curious about almost all aspects of other people's social interactions, though Natasha had no intention of pointing that little tidbit out since she'd have to explain it too, and even Tony deserved to keep some of his secrets secret.

Clint was too busy being scandalized to pick up on the faint wistfulness in Tony's tone. "None of your goddamn business, Stark. And stop calling him a g-man."

Not that Clint's final objection was anything more the pro forma. First off, Tony gave everyone nicknames (rarely using the same one twice), and nothing anyone had ever said had made a difference, not even Fury. Secondly, having other cops thinking Clint was involved with a Fed actually worked in Clint and Phil's favor, not that there was anyone else around to overhear as the three of them took the final set of stairs heading up to the squad room. If nothing else, it allowed Clint to be able to discuss his and Phil's relationship with someone else without giving away the game.

Lastly, it was also apt. Phil drove a 'vintage' black 4-door Crown Vic and generally wore the same kind of sunglasses Feds and Tommy Lee Jones did in Men in Black. He also more often than not, showed up to work in dark suits with light colored shirts and solid dark ties, if also not a bit more designer in them than most Feds bothered with. (Not at Tony's level, of course.) Indeed, Natasha had no doubt Phil would have made an excellent Feeb or Spook, had he taken his training in just that twist of a different direction.

"Well, if we can't gossip about you..." In his pause, Tony looked toward Natasha, then swallowed heavily.

"Did you know that our fearless leader, he of the fetching patch and trench coat, has proven himself to be a traitor as well as a lying liar who lies, by being seen regularly in the company of that little hottie in charge of our rivals over at the 5th?" he offered instead in a remarkable show of good judgment. "As if the lovely but sneaky Marsha Hill isn't just leading him on in order to get a copy of our playbook so they can beat us in the spring tournament."

Natasha arched her brow. "You mean Maria Hill?" she asked Tony a little more sharply than was prudent, given how he'd see it as her being defensive instead of disgusted.

"If she's meeting with Fury, it isn't about sex or baseball." Natasha might no longer be part of IAB, but she still prided herself in knowing the goings on around her.

Still, Tony had gotten the rival thing correct between Maria Hill and Fury. Hill had a solid patron at One PP, while Fury had his job in spite of his relationship with the Brass. So far it had seemed a friendly enough rivalry, since Hill was a damn good cop herself and normally eschewed pitting her squad against any of the others except during the structured contests and tournaments One PP and other committees sponsored all in good, clean fun. But Maria Hill was also one of very few women with a significant rank within the NYPD, so with or without a highly placed supporter, when she had to play the game of politics or brinkmanship, she played to win.

Fury, on the other hand, relied on his and his squad's record to keep his position. And quite possibly some blackmail that even Natasha hadn't been able to ferret out. Yet.

Not that she would ever use such knowledge against Fury. If someone that far above them was vulnerable, however, she wasn't above taking her own advantage, especially if it kept the Brass off of Fury, the squad or her partner.

"Tony, you can't just start making up rumors to entertain yourself," Clint admonished. "Especially
Tony smirked, then nodded and mimed twisting a lock against his lips. In another few seconds the three of them would reach the squad room and, while it might be one thing to speculate about their boss' love life in the halls, not even Natasha was fearless enough to do so while standing right in front of his office.

Leaving them at the entrance, Tony immediately moved into the squad room and draped himself over Bruce Banner, who was diligently studying something on his computer that Tony just had to know about.

Natasha let Clint dump their coats onto the already overcrowded rack while she made her way to her desk. The rest of the squad, other than Phil, were already at their own and called or nodded in greeting. Of Phil there was no sign, but Fury's office door was closed. Going by the anxious look Steve sent in that direction, obviously Phil was inside with Fury and possibly someone else.

"Do we know what's going on?" Clint asked Steve, taking his own desk and turning on his monitor.

Steve shook his head, unwilling to speculate aloud even if he did have a reasonable guess. Donald "Thor" Blake, however, wasn't so reserved. Or had once more gotten better intel from his girlfriend, Jane, who also happened to be the Chief Medical Examiner.

"Three different places that use industrial lasers were broken into last night," Tony's partner proclaimed from behind his desk.

Because he could never just speak to them without making his words announcements. Like Natasha, English was not Thor's first language. Nor one, it seemed, he could speak quietly in.

"During one of the robberies, an unfortunate bystander on the street at the wrong time was killed. Hit and run."

Bruce spun his chair around and took up the narrative as he ran a computer trace on the crimes Thor spoke of, seemingly unperturbed that Tony still leaned against his back. "That was during the theft of a high-power welding laser from a machine shop on Clay. The other two calls reported a medical excimer laser taken from the Lazik place over on Anderson and an ion laser from the Moctezuma recording studio used for light shows."

With that he tapped the screen and blanked it, spinning around in his chair to face the rest of them and, not so incidentally Natasha thought, displacing Tony, to go by the tiny smile that graced Bruce's lips when Tony flailed.

Natasha wasn't sure about those two. Tony was an asshole, their Dilettante Detective, who spoke of himself in the third person and lived in front of the news cameras. As sole heir to the Stark fortune, he lived in the penthouse of an otherwise mostly empty Upper East Side seven-story apartment building that he constantly tried to get the rest of the A-Squad to move into with him. Something Bruce, surprisingly, had taken Tony up on.

While Tony pinged on her gaydar as someone willing to sleep with just about anyone, having no gender preference, he also, however, seemed to genuinely love Pepper, from what little Natasha had observed on the occasional full team –including SOs – night out. As for Bruce, she'd truly thought him mostly asexual until Clint had mentioned the CSI tech, Betty Ross. Bruce had never brought Betty along to one of the squad gigs, but neither did he hang around Tony any more than he did any of the rest of them. Whether Pepper was there too or not. Betty aside, Natasha basically thought of him as married to his research as much as Fury was married to his badge; a holdout
from Bruce's previous career as a top microbiologist, with no interest or time for dating.

Not that any of it mattered, of course, other than she liked to know things, all things, most especially about the people around her on a day-to-day basis.

"Not three hauls you would normally assume involved a single crew, especially with the crimes having taken place at roughly the same time. Each laser has completely different kinds of applications…” Bruce trailed off with a shrug and took off his reading glasses and set them in his pocket.

"Just weird enough that it'll end up one of ours, Clint muttered, pulling apart the muffin someone (Phil or Steve, no doubt) had left on his and Natasha's desks since they'd had their witness interview first thing, with no time for getting breakfast.

"Three simultaneous jobs means a large crew," Steve pointed out

"Or simply three very knowledgeable thieves," Tony contradicted him, not just as part of his nature but in his normal interaction with Steve.

As the youngest if not the newest detective in their squadron, Steve was their probie, their greenie, and the one who Tony had decided would most benefit from his teachings and example. Tony, however, was not one who allowed himself to appear altruistic, always couching things in innuendo or insult. It didn't matter that Steve had fantastic instincts and a commendable work ethic, that out of all of them he would most likely make Captain first. (Though only because it was obvious that Phil would Fury's right hand man up until the day one of them was forced out by whatever means: politics, retirement or death).

Natasha was sure that Tony didn't like the idea of someone greener than him tracking faster – but that was only ego since, as a billionaire, Tony didn't have to work in the first place and, therefore, his ambition was a bit disingenuous.

Natasha, however, did need her job. Tuning out their typical bickering, she took out the notes from the morning's interview. Speculating on a case that hadn't been assigned to them was not the way she was going to spend the rest of her morning. Not when she and Clint had already caught a case involving what looked like premeditated murder.

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"I think we should bring in the daughter's boyfriend."

Clint looked up from whatever he'd been doing behind his desk. "Okay."

And that was one of the things Natasha most liked about her partner. He always had her back – trusted her – and he rarely felt the need to ask her to explain herself. Because of his show of trust, she found she was more willing to offer explanations anyway. If he'd actually been more like her, if he had had her kind of initial training, she'd be double-thinking about all of this, would be ready to accuse him of manipulating her into trusting (liking) him in return, but that same training had taught Natasha how to read people, especially men, and she was confident Clint did not operate that way.

He was a straight shooter, no saint, of course, and he could wield honesty like a weapon (not to mention that he could give Tony a run for his money in dickishness), but when Clint wanted or expected something from someone, he didn't mince words. None of the passive-aggressive bullshit unless he was deliberately trying to get a rise, and even then if he didn't like something or someone, he made little or no effort to play the game to spare someone's feelings. Natasha was
trying to move more in that direction herself, to remember that she no longer needed to convince the people around her she was good or harmless or loyal, that she no longer needed to rely on only herself as she'd done even after fleeing Russia for America.

Being someone's partner was still new, still hard, but she was beginning to see some of the benefits.

"Bruce, I would also like you to take the lead on the boyfriend's interrogation," Natasha spoke up so her voice would carry to the other sets of desks. "He's a chem student at NYU and interned at our murder victim's company last summer. The daughter alibied him out and while I don't think she was lying, I do think he has the knowledge to have come up with something, some sort of drug or compound that could have been slow acting as well as untraceable but I don't know enough chemistry myself to catch him in a lie. Or even ask the right questions."

"If Jane didn't find anything, I doubt I can, but shoot me a copy of the vic's autopsy report and I'll take a look," Bruce agreed to the proposal without actually saying yes.

"Even if you can come up with a means, what's his motive?" Phil asked from behind his single desk in the center of the room as befit his status instead of being doubled with a partner across from him like the rest of them. "Marshal Jennings had no position, influence, or money for the daughter to inherit and the boyfriend to covet. And from what your notes have said, the boyfriend and the daughter's relationship was stable, so I don't see him benefiting from relying on the sympathy angle."

Natasha knew she shouldn't be surprised that Phil was not only up to date on the case file, but could also recite any of the pertinent details without needing to look things up. She tossed him a shrug. "Call it a gut feeling," she offered, feeling only a little self-conscious, a little on display since everyone was now looking in her direction. She hated the excuse of women's intuition and normally wouldn't play that card, but in this instance she knew Van Horn was behind the murder if not the actual deliverer. She was also frustrated since she had no better reason she could explain. At least, she also knew that Phil wasn't questioning her ability so much as trying to help her refine her suspicions.

"Maybe we shouldn't discount the sympathy play," Clint spoke up when she could not. "Sure, everyone says the two of them were good, solid, but they weren't engaged or anything. They'd simply been dating for a year or so. Amanda Jennings is pretty, charismatic and popular, which is almost a complete opposite of Kurt Van Horn and he had to have been wondering when she'd fall for someone… better. Only now Amanda can't make it through the day without Van Horn's help. Grief can make people far too willing to believe the people around them actually care instead of responding for their own selfish kicks."

Clint's expression was too bland to think he wasn't speaking from his own experiences, but any one of them could have offered the same insight, which was damn depressing to think about. Natasha dismissed her knowledge of the backgrounds and secrets she wasn't supposed to know so much about and latched instead onto the picture Clint had painted between Jennings and Van Horn. "While I don't want to say Clint's right about Jennings being out of Van Horn's league in the long run, he is right about their relationship now. She's basically let him become her everything, and that's a very hard bond to dissolve. Maybe we're looking for something too complicated, because the method of the murder was well thought out. But maybe it is simply a case of Van Horn doing anything to assure that he won't lose his girlfriend."

Phil nodded. "So bring him in and find out."

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Everyone's interrogation style was different. For herself, Natasha liked to use the mark's tells against them. She would either challenge them with what she knew and get them to confirm or correct her when she was wrong, or she'd offer herself up in another role they could relate to, beyond the cop and their questioner: sympathizer or supplicant, sometimes the enforcer though she usually left it to Clint to play the bad cop.

When Clint wasn't deliberately provoking or intimidating a suspect, he often did so anyway, simply by his silences or his cold, inflectionless recital of a case's details. He was normally ice in the interrogation room, not letting even the cases involving kids appear to touch him, but then he'd also seen way too early in his life the types of horrors adults could inflict on children.

Bruce had had similar exposure in his own childhood, yet where Clint was ice in front of the suspects, Bruce was fire, burning with empathy or anger and sometimes scaring himself along with the skel in his passion to do right by the victim. Bruce could also spot a lie, maybe not quite as well as Natasha when it came to those based on emotions, but nearly always when the lie was one based on facts. Even when he wasn't sure of the answer himself, Bruce could still eight times out of ten call them bullshit.

That's what Natasha needed in front of Van Horn, fact checker or intellectual bullshit detector, because while Van Horn might be self-conscious about his lack of social or physical graces, he still carried an arrogance about him with regard to his work and education. He'd already done his own detecting in their first interview and knew that neither Clint or Natasha could follow most of what he'd said about his research.

Bruce, Natasha observed from the one-way window, did not have that problem.

"I think the thing I hated the most about being good in chem, was all those people who came up to me afterward, asking if I would mix something up for them. Meth, Coke. I even had a guy offer me ten grand to make him E. That he was only going to use on himself, of course."

Van Horn's eyes flicked from Bruce to Clint who leaned against the wall near the mirror, then to Bruce again, and the file that Bruce had yet to open but which lay under his fingers.

"Did you turn them in?"

Bruce shook his head. "For all I knew, they could have been the trap – against me. I told them no, told them to tell their friends no too." Bruce shrugged. "It maybe slowed down the requests, but they never really stopped. I don't suppose it's any different for you?"

Natasha could see that Van Horn recognized the outlines of the trap, but that he also couldn't make out the details, so he couldn't avoid stepping into it. He tried, though, with the most transparent, stupid statement he could have come up with.

"No one really has," Van Horn lied, shaking his head. "I hear a few guys joking about it, some of the other students in my classes, others who I'm just walking by, but no one approaches me for it. I guess they think I'm too much of a… boy scout or something."

Van Horn was doing a pretty good job of making himself appear small and harmless by this point, answering Bruce's questions and less direct queries with politeness and deference. As if, indeed, he was the straight-laced kid who wasn't exactly sure why he was being interrogated. It was quite different than the kid she and Clint had first interviewed, and Van Horn had met Clint this time with a sneer and raised head when he'd been brought into the room by the unis. He'd immediately reworked his body language and responses after Clint had introduced Bruce, however.

Like he'd recognized Bruce's name and Natasha hadn't really thought about that happening when
she'd asked Bruce to sit in, something she'd have to better take into consideration if a similar situation came up in the future. She'd known that Bruce had been one of the top in his field before he'd turned his back on his research to join the NYPD, but it hadn't really clicked that he might have had a following… Have fans.

Van Horn was no boy scout, Natasha was sure of that. But his submission wasn't any more faked than the arrogance. He was a kid trying to become a man, holding on to the one thing he was good at while he was failing with most everything else. She could empathize, almost, as his story could be anyone's including her own, though she'd been younger when she'd fought a similar battle. His desperation reeked, however, tainting anything good about him, a corruption that had led him to murder, of that she had no doubt.

"You're lying!" Bruce suddenly shouted, standing up from his chair and slapping his hands down on the table between him and Van Horn.

Natasha startled almost as badly as Van Horn, having obviously tuned out more deeply than she'd intended and missed something. Clint hadn't moved at all, not in surprise nor to push Bruce back, to tell him to cool off.

While Van Horn sat there visibly quaking, no doubt now desperate to not pee his pants, Bruce stepped back on his own and ducked his head.

"I'm sorry," he then said, apparently not able to look at Van Horn. "Sorry, that was mean. I didn't… I shouldn't have – "

Now Clint moved, flipping open the file that Bruce had sent half off the table, pulling out images and sliding them around in front of Van Horn. Images of Marshal Jennings in autopsy, it looked like from Natasha's position. Including a series of close ups showing the holes were Dr. Foster had removed certain organs. They had Van Horn turning green, but it was the shot of Amanda standing there in autopsy, identifying a much more intact body that had Van Horn turning and vomiting.

That was Natasha's cue, one she hadn't been sure she'd receive, but she could work with a kid who still felt remorse. Who'd been so self-centered he thought only about the results he was trying to create, not the additional consequences. It was still weird playing the good cop after a lifetime of being the stiletto or scalpel, but weird sometimes could also be… nice.

Second Squad, this is dispatch. Not to disturb those of you on your meal break, but be aware that we are receiving reports of a disturbing number of flambé pets being found throughout the precinct. When will people remember that not only does wearing fur make you a target, but it burns just as fast as hair?

"Natasha, do you have a minute?"

She and Clint stopped at Steve's question, then Clint gave her a sharp nod and continued on toward the stairs. He'd wait for her in the car, which would also mean it would be warmed up when she got there, something she couldn't count as a bad thing. Not that talking to Steve was a bad thing either, though it was a little odd that he was asking to talk to her alone.

Really alone, it appeared, as Steve led her toward one of the conference rooms, actually peering into it to make sure it was empty before he ushered her inside with an aborted hand movement that most likely had originally intended to rest on the small of her back and guide her before he turned it into a jerky wave forward.
She gave Steve a calm smile, which he could take as an appreciation that he was learning she
didn't generally appreciate such old-fashioned considerations or as gentle encouragement for him
to get over his obvious case of nerves and just tell her. She did actually mean the smile for both,
not that she would have called him on his inherent chauvinism this time since she knew he simply
saw it as proper manners and not any indication of her being weaker – or any attempt to cop a feel
unlike another certain detective, though Tony had only tried that once.

On another day, she might still let Steve fret and flounder, staying silent while he worked up his
courage as one more training lesson to get him to treat her just like the other guys in the squad, but
he had also remembered not to ask Clint for permission to steal her away for this 'minute', and
such a step forward deserved a little reward. Clint was always telling her Steve's behavior was half
her fault anyway, that every time she held herself apart from the rest of them, she only reinforced
that she wasn't just like the rest of them. She had a feeling Clint was right, especially in Steve's
case, but guarding herself was just as ingrained as Steve's need to be a guardian, nor was Steve
just one of the guys himself.

Actually, none of her 'boys' fit the typical male stereotype of frat boys and Neanderthals, from
Nick Fury on down and even including Tony, though he certainly made more of an effort to
portray one, at least when outside eyes were on him. Being part of the Second was nothing like
working for IAB, and she didn't think that was solely because of the different nature of the squad's
interactions or investigations. They were misfits, all of them, atypical and asocial, but somehow it
all worked. They worked.

At least generally, when Steve was not fidgeting like a school boy and looking like he was scared
of her.

While she normally liked that in a man, she just felt guilty now in seeing it in Steve. And realized
she needed to continue with her plan to of hooking Darcy and Steve up, if not for their sakes, than
for her own.

"What can I do for you, Steve?" she asked, putting him out of his misery; ingrained manners
meant he wouldn't – couldn't – avoid answering when she asked him a direct question.

Though it didn't mean he couldn't still prevaricate.

He didn't, however, because if there was one thing his old-fashioned, out-dated approach to life
had engendered within him, it was bravery just to be able to hold onto his core values in the face
of all the teasing and ridicule they provoked. At least amongst his friends, it was always good-
natured, but Natasha had little doubt that there had been many people in Steve's life who had seen
his innate wholesomeness as something to poke at and shred.

"So, I was asked out. By a woman," he was quick to add.

Natasha had to temper her smile. Anytime Steve went out in public, he was hit on, man or
woman. Obviously this was something different.

"I haven't said no, but…” Here, he paused and a slow flush started to build from the tips of his
ears down. "I'd like to say yes, but I don't, really, know what to do. Not that," he suddenly added,
no doubt going off of how wide her eyes as well as her smile had gotten. "I have had a date
before. I've had sex before, too, despite what Tony might imply. But this is the first time a gal has
asked me out and, well... I can't really ask Tony, because he's in a committed relationship and
even if he wasn't, he's still…”

"Tony," Natasha supplied, knowing exactly what Steve meant. You went to Tony for tech advice,
and maybe some computer tips, but that was it. You couldn't even ask him about good restaurants
or fashion choices, since his idea of normal was so far skewed beyond how anyone else might consider it.

"I thought about asking Clint or Phil, because, well, they at least wouldn't make fun of me, but they're gay and neither of them seems the candy and flowers type. So, do I still bring candy or flowers if the woman asked me? Should I expect she'll want to pay for everything? Open my door or – "

Once more, Natasha did her best to rein in her amusement. Phil was totally the candy and flowers type, if you substituted comic geek things for roses and bonbons, while Clint's affections could be bought with little more than someone paying attention to him and a kind word – or home baked goods – but she thought she knew what Steve was floundering over while trying not to be insulting. He firmly believed the strong should look after the vulnerable, which often translated to men looking out for women in their line of work, even when he knew the concept wasn't that cut and dried. Having someone looking out for him was too foreign, since even as a kid, Steve had looked after his mother just as much as she'd watched over him. Sure, she knew that James had pulled off a few bullies off Steve during their childhood of growing up in the same neighborhood, but even then Steve had been fighting back whether he could win or not. He'd been vulnerable but never a victim.

Steve was also a natural leader, so taking the backseat even for something as innocuous as a date had to be confusing.

"Okay, first, some of it depends on the woman," and here Natasha paused, for just a second to see if Steve would spill on the identity. When he didn't, she forged ahead. "But overall, yes, if she's asked you out, she's going to be fine with paying for the night's plans. And you should let her. If it makes you feel bad, you can offer to pick up the tip assuming you're doing dinner, then reciprocate the next time, assuming the two of you want a next time. You might want to skip the flowers or candy, but you can still open doors for her, if you get to one first. If you really feel the need to gift her with something, go easy, like something stupid and cute she could put on her desk or just make a recommendation about something you think she'd enjoy. Just something that says you are paying attention to her, that you've thought about her as something more than a tally on your scorecard."

Only Steve could blush while also looking indignant. "I would never – "

"I know that," Natasha said with a soft smile and her hand held up. "Hopefully she knows that too, which I think you can safely assume since she asked you first." She tilted her head in sudden thought. "Unless you just met her in a Starbucks or something and she hit on you because of what she saw. If that's the case and you want to say yes, which is perfectly fine and respectable, then all you need to do is be attentive during the date. You can also set whatever limits you feel comfortable with, just as she will. No always means no, whoever says it, and just because you're a guy doesn't mean a woman might not want to take advantage."

"I… she would never… it's Darcy. You know, from Dispatch?"

While Natasha felt like crowing in hearing that, she simply gave Steve one of her sweet smiles. "You two will be fine."

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James stopped suddenly, just as he was reaching for the door. "Remind me why we're stopping here to pick up dinner for your partner?" he asked.

Natasha sighed internally. "Because Chinese Musician does lobster fried rice and normally uses
white meat for the chicken dishes, not dark?” she quipped, because she wasn't going to take shit even from him. Nor was she in the mood to play twenty questions and enable his unwarranted jealousy.

"Very funny, Nat. Fine, what I meant to ask was why we were stopping for your partner during the middle of our first date in almost a month?"

This time James actually pulled on her arm, just enough to indicate he wanted to shift them away from the door, though he wasn't stupid enough to actually try and move her.

She followed, but only because they'd been blocking the door and, while no one was trying to enter or exit around them yet, getting run into wasn't on her agenda either.

"We are stopping because Clint is doing a favor for your best friend, taking over Steve's mentor slot at the youth center tonight so Steve can set up his art for the gallery show you arranged for him," she reminded him pointedly, though not with real anger. Most of the time she thought the jealousy was cute, was a compliment as well as a novelty, since it came out of a genuine caring for her instead of him thinking of her as his possession.

She knew James wasn't complaining out of any real anger either. He was simply a child sometimes, hating to share her attention with anyone, especially when it had been too long between opportunities for them to do more than talk to one another on the phone or see each other briefly passing through the same hallways.

"Clint left straight from the precinct and has been there for the last three hours," she continued. "He didn't have a chance to grab anything to eat before we clocked out and I expect he hasn't taken a break tonight, either, since he loves being run ragged by the little monsters just as much as Steve does. I know he likes this place, and it's on the way to your car – "

James cut her off, his face taking on an actual pout that she wasn't exactly immune to; although this time she mainly wanted to laugh at him for it. Some badass shark of a lawyer he was

"Except you are planning on delivering it to him, aren't you?"

"Well, I could invite him over to pick it up, but I thought you and I had plans for tonight." She raised a single eyebrow (something he couldn't manage) in invitation for him to keep on complaining.

James' response was more growl than words. He pulled her toward him much more forcefully than before, and gave his real answer to her teasing with a brutal kiss that she matched with a bite that drew a laugh from his throat and blood from his lower lip.

"How are you still jealous of Clint?" she murmured with another nip at his lip before pulling back and starting once more for restaurant door.

"Me, jealous of a cop with a GED and a college degree only because of the GI Bill?" he scoffed as this time he dutifully followed her inside.

"You have a degree because of the GI Bill," she pointed out over her shoulder.

"Yeah, a law degree from Columbia, fourth best school in the nation. Clint's is what, Phys Ed?"

She fully rounded on him this time. "Criminology, with a minor in Counseling from John Jay College of Criminal Justice, as you damn well know. And medaling in the Olympics, even if it was in archery, isn't something to be so dismissive of, Mister 'Fourth best in the nation'. What, you couldn't get accepted into one of the top three?" she mocked.
"Just order the damn food," he said sharply, manhandling her to turn around as the hostess braved approaching them.

Natasha let him get away with his Neanderthal behavior. She then placed the order while also making small talk in fluent Cantonese, just to take that much longer, to rag James just that much more since he didn't speak the language and would further be denied her attention.

She wasn't exactly pissed off on Clint's behalf. For the most part, the two men got along well, going so far as to occasionally even gang up on her in their bonding. The two also had several things in common: military service (James with the Army and Clint the Marines), areas in which they'd seen action, and with sniper training. Not to mention, they both now served Lady Justice like it was a calling, not just something each did to make a living.

Still, Natasha knew that Clint rarely spoke of his childhood and growing up with only a brother, not so much ashamed about being an orphan and, later, living on the streets, but deeply affected nonetheless by his father's drinking and temper, that the only reason his father hadn't killed his mother with his fists is that he'd done so by driving drunk first. Clint was self-conscious about not having ever finished middle school, much less high school, never realizing what an extraordinary accomplishment he'd achieved by getting his GED and then his degrees despite his lack of a basic education. At least James never treated Clint any differently than he treated anyone else for the differences in their backgrounds.

"Hey, you know I think Clint is a great guy, that I'm glad that he's your partner, even over Steve," James told her as they headed back out after Clint's dinner had been handed over, neither of them having said anything more while they'd waited, given the audience they'd already earned from their entrance. "And I'm not jealous, not really – "

Natasha hushed him with fingers. He started to protest, no doubt thinking she might still be mad at him or maybe from the taste of leather she'd forced on him, but she gave him a quick, sharp shake of her head and pointed off toward the other side of the street and the narrow alleyway that bisected two darkened storefronts. She could see when he got it, when he heard what she had over the commonplace sounds of light traffic and other people: several shouts and what could have been a car backfiring, but what they both recognized as gunshots.

James dropped the bag with the food and whipped out his cell phone while he followed her across to the other side of the street. "What's your damn badge number?" he asked in a harsh whisper as he dialed 911 and she pulled out her service weapon from where it rested on her hip. (Her breast got in the way in making a quick draw from a shoulder rig.)

She started to answer, but apparently so had the 911 dispatch and James started talking, still in a whisper and not breaking his stride as he crept along the building behind her.

"This is ADA Barnes. I'm with Detective Romanova out of the Second, Badge number seven seven three five. We have just crossed Java Street, closer to Manhattan Avenue than Franklin, moving down an alley toward the sounds of shots fired. Send back-up."

Natasha couldn't help but smile. In the heat of things, James was as cool, as skilled as she was. Though they'd never talked about it directly, she had concluded early on in their relationship that he would have stayed in the military had he been given the opportunity or at least become a cop like Steve, had he not lost his left arm during the Iraq War. He still came to the range with her, could still beat her scores in marksmanship with a pistol; it was just using a rifle that was sometimes iffy for him now.
When they reached the corner between their alley and the next one, Natasha stooped to remove her holdout gun from its ankle holster, handing it and her own cell phone to James.

He didn't have to ask, hitting speed dial number two and filling Clint in on their situation. The youth center was closer to their location than the local precinct, though there could be a nearer squad car –

No. Or at least, the closest was already there, stationary, with doors open and one of the officers seated on the street and slumped against the meager support and protection of the opened passenger side door. Natasha couldn't see whether the uni was alive or not, nor where his partner might be.

She couldn't see a gunman either.

But she heard them. Shots were suddenly traded, including one from right behind her that had her jumping and spinning toward James while she stifled both fear and anger as she didn't know why –

He pointed to the nearest street light that she only now registered had gone out. By him firing when the others had, the extra shot would unlikely have been noticed. Now the area they crouched in was dark so when they advanced, they had a much better chance of doing so unseen.

She gave him a rueful smile and a quick nod of appreciation. She should have thought of that herself.

In all good conscience, she should also insist that James stay right where he was, staying safe as well as providing necessary intel to any officers arriving on the scene. She knew, however, that he would refuse. They could argue, but Natasha didn't think they could waste the time. She could admit, too, that she appreciated the backup.

He did let her take point, duck-walking behind her and covering her back. Natasha led them toward the cruiser, making sure she held her badge prominent in her off hand while keeping the gun barrel down toward the street until she could determine whether the downed uni was aware or not.

He wasn't conscious, she discovered as she knelt by him and checked for a pulse, but at least he also wasn't dead. She left him for James to deal with his wound (a gunshot, high up near his right shoulder and bleeding like a stuck pig), carefully leaning over the both of them and stretching into the car for the shotgun. For a second she debated also going for the r/t mic, but feared the she'd be overheard and potentially warn the shooters that back-up had arrived.

From the lack of much of a blood trail, their uni had been hit at car side. He'd made some attempt to render first aid on himself before he'd passed out, leaving Natasha to figure both he and his partner hadn't realized how badly he'd been hurt for the partner to then have left. The same thing she was going to have to do, given that the shots had come from somewhere farther on.

Natasha started removing her coat and gloves, so she could take advantage of her speed and flexibility if either proved needed. At least it wasn't snowing; hadn't snowed for most of the last week. Of course, that only made the night colder, something she'd no doubt feeling soon enough, even with the adrenalin warmer her right now.

"James, I've got to – " She didn't need to finish, James nodding and holding up his left hand, the one he hadn't removed the glove from when he'd packed the uni's wound.

"Give me just a second to make sure Officer… Grimes isn't going to bleed out." He also started
removing his own coat, taking it and hers to wrap around the officer.

"Maybe you should –"

"Don't even, Nat. If you're not going to wait for real back-up, you're just going to have to accept it from me. I –"

A sharp whistle cut him off. Well, Natasha's reaction to that whistle, since James didn't know its significance. She twisted to look back the direction they'd come, seeing a shadow moving that proved to be Clint as he continued to follow their path. That wasn't a surprise, though also seeing Tony and Bruce following him, was.

"What have we got?" Tony asked as they closed the distance to join her and James in crouching behind the patrol car.

"Don't know yet. We heard shots fired, found Officer Grimes down at the scene, although the rest of it seems to be occurring a further block east. Where did you two come from?" she had to ask of Bruce and Tony.

"Your partner," Tony laid the blame on Clint. "He decided tonight was the perfect time to teach Steve's little buddies how to do basic parkour moves. He needed a couple more supervisors, so he drafted us."

Natasha showed Tony no sympathy. Clint might have asked for help, but Tony could have said no. He did it all the time when Fury or Phil 'volunteered' their squad for a variety of extracurricular activities. Unless it involved the press.

"Thor is on his way, too," Clint told her as he handed over the bullet proof vest he kept for her in his car. He was wearing his own already, pulled over and wrapped around a soaked tanktop that matched his ragged sweats.

She turned up her nose, but still accepted the vest. "You stink," she complained.

"Love you, too," came his response, half distracted as he unslung the rifle case he'd also recovered from the trunk of his car. Most of the time they had one of the Emergency Service Units running point before engaging known, armed hostiles, so Clint didn't get the opportunity to put his long-range marksmanship to work often. He was a decent shot with a handgun (she, Phil and Tony, of all people, were better), but no one matched his rifle scores, including the guys on the SWAT teams. ESU had been recruiting him ever since he'd put his time in on patrol but he always said no. Especially once he'd come to work under Fury and Phil.

Natasha let Tony check her vest's closures, while she did the same to him. He was still wearing the same suit he'd gone to work in, while she'd changed into a great fluffy sweater and jeans before James had picked her up for their date. Bruce was dressed somewhere between Clint and Tony, in jeans and a sweatshirt, and from the lack of sweat stains or manly funk, it appeared he also had been more of an observer too, while Clint – and most likely Thor – had been the ones showing the kids all the moves.

What Bruce was not wearing was his vest. He'd stopped wearing his almost two months ago, something he regularly got into arguments about with the rest of them, since his reason was all new-age mysticism, spiritual superstitious bullshit. (Just because he'd managed to survive being shot point-blank while not wearing one once did not mean he'd be negating the 'miracle' by doing so now). Not even Natasha was willing to argue with him tonight, however, since he was handing the vest Tony had pushed on him over to James.
"I'll send Thor on after you," James offered as he put the vest on, seemingly content to remain with the downed officer now that she had proper back-up.

Natasha leaned over to give him a quick kiss on the cheek. She then handed the shotgun over to Bruce and started to move away from the car. Tony reached over and clamped onto her arm to stop her, which had her spinning on the ball of her back foot, more than ready to do the violence to him she often threatened when he was at his most obnoxious, but he simply held out his other hand and lifted it to offer her a tiny earbuds he pulled out of his pants pocket.

"Right now, they're simply keyed to each other, though eventually I will be able to hook them into the precinct's comms," he explained, grinning but also looking apologetic.

Whether it was for touching her or because he felt he'd somehow failed them in not having the comm units finished, Natasha wasn't quite sure. She didn't ask, wouldn't apologize either for his misassumption of his intentions, but she did take what he offered before she started forward again, which was a kind of apology.

"They're voice-operated and the mic is built in and picks up the vibrations when you talk. Range should be about a mile. Since Steve's not here, Mr. Barnes, Esquire, can use his and pretend he's Phil. Start coordinating everything."

Only Tony Stark would develop military grade – or better – radio transceivers as a hobby. The units were passed out and Natasha, very quietly, said "comm check after a twenty count," once she moved beyond the patrol car, curious about how their sensitivity and sophistication. Similar type systems she'd used in the past while still in Russia proved unreliable, triggered by heavy breathing or background noises, then not activating if someone tried to whisper or were too weak to speak up.

She heard nothing, however, until three 'checks' followed after the pause that allowed them to spread out somewhat along the street; Tony and Bruce moving across to the other side while Clint paced behind her.

"James?"

"Right, sorry. Check."

Satisfied, and not just a little amazed, Natasha felt more optimistic about proceeding without waiting for ESU or even more patrol cars. Until they reached the next crossroad and she peered once more beyond. Found their missing officer.

He laid crumpled on the street, unmoving. This time Natasha could see his opened, unblinking eyes that showed he was dead, even if she couldn't also smell the blood that pooled around him. "Dammit," she couldn't help remarking. "The bus won't be able to help this one."

"Do you have eyes on any shooters?" Bruce asked after giving up and letting Tony take point on their side of the street.

"I see several blown out windows in the three-story kitty-corner from me on the other side of the street," Natasha answered, squinting carefully as she didn't want to loose all of her night vision to the security light further up the block. "The broken glass is on the outside, so it could be from the shootout. Three windows, no four…. And I've got two human-shaped shadows moving and one face that is definitely playing look-out. One shadow and the look-out at street level, with the other up on the third floor. There is no telling if there are more, or even why the patrol ran afoul of them. James, can you contact dispatch and see if Grimes and his partner were responding to an alarm or maybe a call?"
Whatever had gotten them involved, it hadn't been something they'd further called in to request back-up, since no one else had responded yet. Not even to James' first call. They needed more intel, but also had to worry that the crew would simply escape out the other side of the building. The only reason she could think of that they hadn't already, was that one of their own was also down, shot, and that they had enough loyalty to one another not to simply leave their dead weight behind.

"I don't suppose anyone knows what that building is?" Clint asked. "Whether we're going to have to worry about hostages? Or walking into a more elaborate trap than gunmen comfortable with shooting cops?"

Hostages would not be good. But it seemed likely, as she doubted the uni who'd left his injured partner behind to chase after them, wouldn't have been aware that he'd been outnumbered. A hostage or more than one would have been reason enough to ignore that however.

Natasha watched as Tony stepped back from his position at the opening and pulled out his smart phone. Bruce edged forward to take the lead position, though he crouched down to make himself a smaller target when he took a peek for himself of what they were facing. Tony was careful to angle the phone and use his body to shield the light it gave off as he accessed the County Clerk property records or maybe the property tax rolls.

"The building is bank-owned as of four months ago," Tony started reading aloud what he found. "In its former life, it was a dance studio. Assuming the owner filed all the required permits, the first level is all one big ballroom, with a walled front area off the entrance that served as the box office slash regular business office, a surrounding u-shaped hallway on the other three sides that served as staging for entrances and exits, and two sets of two small dressing rooms on the west and east walls."

While Tony called up the rest of the layout, Clint tapped Natasha on the shoulder and gestured back down the way they'd come, pointing toward a rickety fire escape. "I'll take the high position, see if I can get a better count," he more mouthed than whispered.

She heard him fine anyway, as did the others as Bruce signaled his and Tony's acknowledgement.

"Okay, second floor should be practice rooms and private studios. Four or maybe six of them, I can't determine which of these two plans is the most recent filing," Tony continued. "The top floor was supposed to be storage. For the props, costumes, lighting and shit like that. In maybe two or three rooms."

"Nicely vague, but leaving lots of places for people to hide," Clint stated the obvious, sounding only slightly winded from running up three stories of stairs after leaping up to pull down the ladder hitched halfway down from the second story landing.

"Tony, you should check the other buildings nearby," Bruce suggested. "I'm going to assume they're either businesses closed for the night, or vacant themselves, since we don't have people hanging out their windows to watch or hiding in their doorways – "

"Or they're smart enough to keep their heads down when the gunfire started," Natasha felt she should offer.

"Or they're just too self-involved to care," was Tony's contribution. "And, yes, I'm on it."

"I was going to add, that if there are several vacant or foreclosed buildings right in the immediate surroundings, there have to be squatters," Bruce continued, sounding just a little testy. "We need to account for that and assume there are hostages, as Clint suggested."
"So, what, you want to start negotiations?" This time Tony was the one sounding testy.

"I just don't think we can charge right in – "

"What we need is a distraction," Clint spoke over Bruce's caution. "Something that won't have them automatically shooting, but still brings them – or most of them – to the windows. Two hookers getting into a catfight might do it, but Steve's the only one of us who looks good in drag and he – "

"My friends, I am here!" Thor's voice made itself heard from James' proximity because, of course, they could hear him through James' transmitter.

"Yeah, ah, Blake just drove up on Steve's motorcycle," James told them. Then, "what the hell, Blake?" they more overhead as he apparently challenged Thor's possession of Steve's bike.

"Steve and I have switched vehicles for the day, friend Barnes, as my truck can hold many of his paintings. And, because of that, I think I can provide your distraction."

"What the hell?" James said again. Then all they could hear was the sound of the motorcycle being revved, first over James' radio, then from down the alley behind them, Doppler shifting lower as he approached, then lower still as he sped past them. He raced through the cross street, not even slowing to see if there was traffic (holy fuck! but there wasn't), blowing past the suspect building before skidding into a turn about halfway down the next block and heading back toward them.

"Which building?" they heard Thor ask remarkably clearly even over the sounds of pegged rpms, proving he'd at least taken the time to get the comm unit from James if not a basic rundown before his lunatic charge.

Natasha was too stunned to answer, still trying to figure out what Thor's play was, though his first pass had attracted the attention of their top floor shooter. Clint, however, being more removed from the sheer absurdity of it in his perch four stories above her, didn't have the same problem that seemed to also silence Bruce and Tony.

"The three-story at your nine o'clock just before you cross the street. Or at your two when you turn again to make another pass."

Make another pass? Somehow, Clint had cottoned onto what Thor was doing because, sure enough, after Thor raced by them once more, he again skidded into a three-sixty and came at the building again. This time, though, instead of crossing by and charging beyond once more, he laid the bike down just before he cleared the cross street, rolling clear at the last second while the bike spun around while on its side, yet continued its forward motion the new angle Thor had set it on by his maneuver.

Only because Natasha knew that Thor had wiped out intentionally, because she knew he'd made his reputation as one of Interpol's top investigators before transferring to the NYPD by going undercover in one of the biker gangs (Avengers Motorcycle Club; allegiance Hells Angels) involved in the Great Nordic Biker War (1994-1997) for four years, she didn't scream. She wanted to, or maybe just yell for the sheer exhilaration as she watched the bike continue to spin and bounce and skid right up over the curb, just missing the burnt out street light, to crash into the corner of the building.

As distraction went, it was amazing. Heads showed themselves at four of the windows, while two of the shooters actually rushed out through the back door to see what had happened, guns slack in their hands.
"NYPD!" Thor roared, coming up from his roll with his gun held steady in a two-handed grip despite the curtain of blood that covered the left side of his face.

Maybe not the way they should have played it, since the response was guns being raised and shots getting fired, but these guys had killed one, maybe two cops, and none of the good guys were feeling charitable. Natasha picked her target on the second floor, knowing Clint would take out the guy on the third, the sounds of their weapons fire – and Thor's – being drowned out by the shotgun blast Bruce turned on the two who'd come outside.

Bodies started to drop – or fall.

The opportunity was now. "Stark?" Natasha called out.

"Yeah. I'm with you," he responded. "Cover fire, please, from the rest of you."

While they did (though in Clint's case it was kill shots; he didn't do cover fire with a rifle), she and Tony charged the building slowing at the door only long enough to kick guns away from the ones Bruce had taken out. Once inside, Natasha shot toward the only one who was ambulatory, calling for him to lose his weapon which he did. Quickly.

"There is still someone moving on two," Clint warned them as she crouched to stuff the other's gun in her holster. "He's beyond my sight; I can only see the shadow. Thor and Bruce are moving in at your back."

"Roger that," Natasha responded, then "face down on the floor, fingers laced behind your neck," she ordered the shooter while Tony checked the other downed man and removed his gun so it couldn't be used against them either. Bruce was the first through the door and Natasha signaled him to watch over their prisoner so she could join Tony who seemed to know where the stairs would be. In another minute, Thor was behind her to keep an eye on the hall and closed doors of the dressing rooms.

Natasha signaled Tony that they were ready and he nodded, moving to the foot of the stairs but staying at the side in a blind spot, just as the landing on the second floor was a blind spot to them. And the stairs themselves, a kill zone.

"NYPD," he called out. "Your buddies down here are down or in custody. Your top guy too. You're alone and surrounded – "

"I've got a hostage!"

Natasha frowned. From what she'd noticed of the ballroom, it was too clean for this place to have been taken over by squatters or junkies. They could have brought a hostage with them, the lure that had drawn the patrol car to their doom, but if that was the case, it was just as likely the hostage was dead by now, given the multiple shoot outs.

Tony apparently thought so to. "Let me hear them say that," he ordered.

"No!"

"Shadow doesn't look like two people," came from Clint in the ensuing silence. "And he's moving back my direction. There's no fire escape on this side, but there is an awning. I would chance the jump if it meant not getting shot or going to jail."

"Yes, well, you're a freak who likes to stand on roof edges and pretend you're Batman or something," Natasha muttered sotto voce to him, confident that Tony's comm system would still
"Dude, you let me hear the hostage, or I and my partner here are going to start firing rounds up into the ceiling. We can hear you moving."

They couldn't, actually, but Clint should be able to give them an approximate location by the shadow. Not that Tony would really fire, or expect her or Thor to either.

Dude? Natasha mouthed.

Tony shrugged and grinned. "You are already going down as cop killer," he addressed their suspect again. "Unless you give the fuck up right now, we're going to put you down.

"I wasn't the shooter. I didn't shoot at anybody."

He's young. And scared, Natasha mouthed again, having heard him speaking enough to pick that up.

Tony nodded. "Okay, the drop whatever weapon you are carrying and come down the stairs with your hands laced behind your neck."

"You'll shoot me. You've already said so."

"I won't shoot you if you're not a killer. And our forensics can tell us that. If you didn't fire a gun, you won't have residue on your hands. But I won't know that unless you fucking surrender!"

From his expression, Tony was only mildly piqued, nowhere near as angry as he sounded. Just properly concerned with ending the stand off before any more cops got hurt. And maybe the kid.

"Okay, okay. Don't shoot. I'm coming down."

"And your hostage?"

"That's just Jeter. The first cops shot him when they saw us coming out of the electronics store over on India with TVs and shit. He'll need a hospital before jail." The last part of the statement was said, not yelled, with the kid standing just before the mid landing and three-sixty turn of the stairs. "Please don't shoot me."

"Just keep coming," Natasha said before Tony could, figuring the kid might not be quite so scared if he knew a woman was on site. It was stupid, since she was much more likely to shoot than Tony was (or Bruce or Steve), but most perps – as well as victims – loved to believe in their stereotypes and since Natasha was small and petite, that had to also mean she was safe.

Being underestimated certainly had its advantages, but so did the perceived gentleness, especially in this case. Kid certainly was right; he couldn't be more than fifteen, his gang tats still scabbed and the skin around the ink still red and inflamed. The front of his jeans were wet – he'd pissed himself at one point – and while Natasha wrinkled her nose at the acrid smell, she said nothing about it and quelled Tony from doing so with a glare. Fear and humiliation could easily turn to anger and stupid bravado, and she just wanted this night to be over.

"This way," she instructed, directing him back into the ballroom with Bruce and the other gang member who'd surrender. She kept half her attention on listening, as Tony and Thor raced up the stairs to see about Jeter, but when no new gunfire or shouting was exchanged, she let herself relax, just a little.

"Hey, James?" Natasha addressed her boyfriend when the kid took to his knees with only a
gesture, then laid down next to his compadre, hands going back behind his neck (none of them had cuffs, nor even tie restraints in having been off duty). "Tell me there are unis on sight just waiting for our call to move in," she directed, stepping back to join Bruce in keeping watch. "We could use a hand with clearing the rest of the rooms and the clean-up. And maybe some coffee, along with our coats and a couple of blankets. Its fucking cold in here, so Clint's got to be a popsicle up on the roof."

"I'm fine, Tasha."

"You are also an idiot," came the response from Phil, not James. "Get your ass down here, Detective Barton. ESU will maintain the perimeter and yes, Natasha, I have patrol officers ready to send in. Try not to shoot them, would you please. Or threaten to kill anymore suspects, Stark."

"Hey, Phil," Tony greeted the new arrival with no ounce of shame in his tone. "Along with that coffee, do you think someone can rustle up some sandwiches or pizza? Maybe a bucket of wings? No? How about cheeseburgers, then?"

Second Squad, this is dispatch. Halloween is over. Which means that if you see the guy wearing a costume ahead of you in the bank, he either can't find his clothes from the day before, or he's there to hold it up, so be wary. And, while we're all thinking of legal extortion day, I still have a supply of eggs. If you don't want to find out how many, I have a preference for full-size chocolate bars and red vines, but will accept giant pixie sticks and Red Bull. Or muffins.

"Oh, good, Phil's late too," Clint said instead of hello as he came into the squad room.

Natasha shook her head and let her grin widen teasingly when Clint's eyes did in response to her no. Clint wasn't really in trouble, of course, since he'd called in about the accident that had had him stuck in traffic. She had no doubt that he'd finally had turned on his lights to move around it, along the wrong side of the street if necessary, since he'd certainly done it before while she'd been in the car as witness. And he was only twenty minutes late, which was nothing, given the snow storm that had blanketed the city in the early morning hours. As far as she knew, only Fury, Steve and Phil had made it in on time this morning; she'd been ten minutes later herself, with Thor coming in a couple of minutes later, and Bruce and Tony arriving together just a couple of minutes before Clint.

"He's with Fury," Steve told Clint. "And Sergeant Bridge. An R&D lab was broken into last night over at Columbia University. Not only was a prototype sonic device stolen, but they left behind a body. Presumably of the security guard, since they can't get in contact with the man who'd been on duty this morning."

"Presumably?" Clint asked. "They haven't ID'd the body?"

"According to my lady Jane," Thor took up the narrative, "the body was incinerated to an extent that even his teeth were no longer viable for identification purposes."

He paused then, so they could each say a prayer for the dead. Norwegian born, Thor claimed he believed in the Viking gods of old, and that things were best served when each was given the proper respect, gratitude or sympathy. No one was really sure if he was just messing with them or if he truly believed, but it was an easy enough to indulge him, not that any of them actually said something or crossed themselves at his cues. Not beyond the one time Darcy had done so when they'd all gone out after hours for drinks and Thor had thought his 'fine, stout ale' needed honoring. Not even Steve, who kept his copy of the Holy Bible on his desk next to his copies of the NYPD rules and regs manuals.
"Additionally, the first of our fellow officers responding to the call were blinded by intense green lights directed through their windshield long enough for the driver to lose control. Fortunately, although their vehicle took extensive damage, neither officer was seriously harmed."

That came with another pause, but Natasha was stuck on the body, not giving gratitude that there weren't more bodies. There weren't too many things that burned hot enough to melt teeth. She supposed Thor and or Jane could have meant the teeth had been cracked or shattered and, of course, everyone's dentist claimed sodas and energy drinks could melt teeth, so there had to be acids that could do the job, but who in the hell would bring that to a robbery? Or go to such an extent as to burn the body then use acid to dissolve the teeth?

Thor still wasn't done. "Though Jane cares not for making speculation, from what I saw in the images, the attack came from a stream or jet of fire as little damage occurred otherwise to the surroundings. Perhaps a flame thrower, or some excessive form of electrical current. She expects to determine today whether he was cooked to death from the outside or inside. If you wish to make your own appraisal, I can show you the early pictures."

"Ah, that's okay, Thor, your description was quite... graphic enough that we don't need to see a photo of the physical remains," Bruce cut in, stopping him but not quickly enough for Natasha to unsee the first image Thor had brought up on his computer screen as he'd swung it their direction. She didn't consider herself squeamish in any sense of the word, but what she'd just glimpsed was disturbing on a primal level. Dreams of burning alive were one of her few nightmares, were almost a phobia, not that she ever let it affect her enough so someone else might guess. Not even Clint. His face was green all on its own from the glimpse he had caught too, but not on her behalf.

"Do you think we're going to get the case instead of Homicide?" Natasha asked, not sure that she wanted the case, even though scoring on Homicide was one of the squad's favorite sports.

"I think that's what Captain Fury and Sergeant Bridge are trying to determine right now," Steve offered up. "Whether this might be related to the missing lasers from last month, and the other odd tech robberies recently. Although the MOs and execution were all different, not to mention the locations and levels of security involved, it's possible that it is the differences that actually connect them."

"Next thing you'll be saying, Steverooni, is that the fabric and costume store robberies are connected to each other too, instead of just being copy-cat crimes by would-be Project Runway candidates," Tony scoffed. "And, obviously, the recent broken windows that have been popping up all over the area are the work of something more than kids with rocks in their hands and in their brains. Some kind of glass-hating gang. Or a palette of art students looking to bring back the endomosaic technique but they've run out of aquarium stones to make their murals."

Steve's expression took on an interesting twist between frustration and interest. His artistic background was no secret to the group, and a frequent source for Tony's mocking, since Tony's only interest in art was either that beaten into him by Pepper, or solely based on value and how much someone else wanted it. For Tony to have pulled up a word like endomosaic in what Natasha had to assume its proper context given Steve's attention, that meant Tony had done some research for no other reason she could fathom than to be able to tease Steve about it. Or to entice him.

Really, was the man's ego so big that he needed two pretend boyfriends? Natasha definitely had to approach Darcy about Steve right away, instead of letting it slide as she had over the last few weeks.

"Tony, is there a point to this beyond hearing yourself talk?" Clint asked.
"Tony Stark always has a point, President Clinton," Tony said with a moue aimed in Clint's direction. "You know that. In this particular instance, Tony Stark's point is that we are wasting time, and we should let Homicide do their jobs instead of looking for some kind of serial thief who picks his targets out of comic books. I mean, really, let's review these so called high tech robberies, shall we?"

With that, Tony dragged one of the white boards from the corner and pulled it closer to the center of the room but where each of them still in their desks to see what he began writing. He started with the costume and fabric thefts, numbering them with lower case letters (to designate their low significance, Natasha was guessing), before starting with a big number one. It was all just posturing, Tony knowing he had everyone's attention in the room and basking in it.

"There's sonic prototype from last night." Writing in:

1. Sonic weapon, not Sonic Screwdriver.

Clint, Bruce and even Steve snickered at that. Natasha, on the other hand, hadn't liked Dr. Who since they'd replaced the Ninth Doctor, and Thor obviously didn't get the reference by his looking around for a clue to the joke.

"Twenty-two days ago," Tony continued, "several industrial and medical lasers were purloined." Leading him to write:

2. Laser Death Ray.

"Three days before the death ray parts went missing, someone broke into the warehouse of the tech museum to steal a small-scale satellite launcher. They don't work, by the way," Tony added with a confidence that was more than ego.

He could have, should have been running Stark Industries, which manufactured high tech in all its forms, including weapons, according to just about everyone. Yet Tony had decided to become a cop, for reasons not even Natasha had been able to ferret out.

"It will take at least a railgun to launch satellites into space." Which translated into:

3. Gun to Launch Shit into Space.

"And, finally, or first, if you really want to believe there is some sort of causality in all of this and we discount the normal robberies at convenience stores, jewelers, pawn shops and the odd attempted bank robbery or two that occur all the time, came three months ago. When an alleged tectonic device that was supposed to be able to create small, localized earthquakes that its inventor claimed would be able to free miners much more quickly when they get trapped underground went missing. Our inventor," and here Tony even made air quotes, "was building it in a storage locker because his wife wouldn't let him do it in their garage. He reported it missing because he'd just filed for the patent and he thought someone in the patent office was the one behind the crime." Tony then wrote:


"Hell, all that's missing is someone being reported lurking in the sewers or subways, the obvious location of the secret lair," Tony scoffed. "Because all this points to is someone out to make himself a super-villain. One who's not actually smart enough to be in the League of Evil Geniuses since he can't manufacture his own weapons, so he's stealing all this junk science crap for a jump start."
"Shit, Tony," came from Steve, not in admonishment but out of awe.

Or something. Natasha wasn't completely certain. She was feeling a little wigged out herself in what she was reading (and because Steve had actually cursed).

As bona fide war hero (another Army boy like James and Phil – 2nd Gulf War; Distinguished Service Medal and a Presidential Unit Citation), and a record-breaking collegiate athlete (baseball and ice hockey, Cornell University, where he'd received a Fine Arts degree of all things). Steve Rogers had come to the department as a sketch artist while still serving in the Active Guard Reserves, before Fury had basically stolen him for his own. Steve believed in God, baseball, motherhood, apple pie – the whole 1940s Americana of Main Street, even though he'd grown up in Brooklyn. He didn't just eat healthy, he guilted everyone else into doing so when around him. He volunteered not only at the neighborhood youth community center, but also the local senior center and as a dog walker when he had the time off duty. Steve was so wholesome, he squeaked. He should have been unbearable, but like the others, Natasha had first learned to tolerate and then actively enjoy being around him, to the point that now she called him a friend.

A friend who never cursed. At least aloud.

Natasha and Steve weren't the only ones disturbed by what they were seeing. Clint and Thor actually looked completely freaked, while Tony and Bruce's expression were mostly contemplative, with a touch of unholy glee and admiration also gracing Tony's for what it could be, if all this shit was connected.

Natasha had to admit, there were plenty of crazies out there, like the recent ones who seemed so eager for the zombie apocalypse, that when they started smoking (or snorting or whatever) their bath salts coke, they then actually tried to eat people's faces and limbs off. Take that kind of wish-fulfillment thinking and couple it with the current raft of and all time popularity of super hero movies in the theaters, and it was maybe more surprising that someone hadn't tried to go the supervillain route before now.

If that's what this was.

Which was stupid and fucked, and if anyone else at the other precincts or down at One PP were thinking it, of course this case was going to land in the laps of Fury's Fuck-Ups.

All the freak show cases seemed to end up theirs. Like the Fruit Loop a month and a half ago that had shaved his head and, somehow, found a tattoo artist to render his entire face and skull as a skull. In red. He'd thought he was Hitler reincarnated and had been trying to brew up biochemical weapons in his kitchen. He had managed to create a nasty designer drug that he'd started selling to some of the kids down at the youth center Steve volunteered at regularly. Which is how the A-Squad had gotten involved with him even though the center was down in Brooklyn.

Steve was the first to break out of his daze. "For the moment, let's say that this really means what we're all thinking. The next question would then be why? Why would someone do this?"

"To try and take over the world," Tony and Clint both chimed in, in their best Pinky & the Brain channeling Orson Welles voices.

Steve just gave them a look. Then continued. "Fine. Not why in that respect, but why as in what for? Why would a criminal need these things? What could they really do with them? Prototypes and small scale models are usually what leads up to the full size working models, but none of these things are going to be something someone could use without being observed. So if someone is really going to try and make one of these work, they're going to get caught."
"Perhaps this person thinks they can miniaturize the technology instead," Bruce speculated. "But the items don't work now, well other than the lasers, so they'd have to figure that out first and then go for the miniaturization breakthrough. Maybe our bad guy doesn't have enough money or access to his own equipment so, like Tony said, he's stealing what he considers raw materials."

Thor shook his head. "This is a waste of time. For the thief and for us. We don't live in a *Star Trek* world, no matter how small our cell phones and computers get."

His freaked out look had been replaced by exasperation, something that showed up more frequently since the Loki incident. It was better than the sighs and frowns and depression or the reckless stunts like with Steve's bike and the gang shootout, but Natasha found herself missing the wide-eyed wonder he'd still exhibited when she'd first met him. In Thor, she'd found a sense of camaraderie she didn't have with any of the others (who'd all been born in the States and born to the culture and surroundings that weren't anywhere near as commonplace as they took for granted). She was quite sorry to see Thor becoming as cynical as she, herself, felt about America, and life in general, though she never wanted to go back to Russia. Even, really, to visit.

"Well, the guy – or gal," Tony added with a quick, apologetic (although not really) look Natasha's direction, "obviously isn't playing with his drive connected to his motherboard. So he either thinks he can do what he needs to, or is intending to kidnap someone he thinks can do this, or… Hell. No. I can't go there either. If this is all the work of one guy, he's as nutty as Fury's Aunt Matilda."

Not that Fury had an Aunt Matilda, or any aunts, according to his personnel report. Not the point, obviously, and on another day, Natasha might be amused to see Tony so rattled that he'd also actually referred to himself frequently in the first person instead of third. But she was still stuck on the dead body from last night, and the idea that someone might be thinking of himself as a supervillain. It didn't really matter if his grand plan failed, since he was already incurring collateral damage.

"Hold on." Clint rose to his feet and moved to the white board. "What if he's already accounted the first thefts as failures? You reversed the order of these, Tony, but objectively, he's moved from pie-in-the-sky devices to things that do actually work. What if he's been screwing around with this stuff and already found out the first things won't do what he wants. Can we predict what he might try to steal next? Catch him that way?"

Bruce shook his head, but not out of exasperation or any form of mockery of Clint's proposal. "Not unless we can figure out what he wants to use them for. And we can't say that his latest acquisition won't do what he's aiming for. He might not need to steal anything else."

"He just stole it last night. So we should have some time to get ahead of him, either figuring out his target in using the sonic whatever, or in figuring out what else he might need to achieve his goal," Steve reminded them, suddenly sounding serious when this had all started as a joke.

"Bruce, Tony, do you think you could come up with the type of things you'd need to make a grand declaration of your super-villain status," he then asked. "One of you lists the potential targets that you'd need one of these devices to affect, if they did work, while the other considers what other devices a not so clever super-villain might want to steal? I know this is all very far fetched, but it's an intriguing idea, and it's not like we've got anything too terribly pressing right now, right? We're just brainstorming and who knows, we might come up with that could prove useful."

"I'll take the potential target list," Bruce volunteered, knowing as did the rest of them, that between them either he or Tony would have been voted most likely to take over the world in their high school yearbook.
"If we are seriously pursuing this," Thor started, rising from his desk and slamming his fist down as he did so, "I would not mind having something to work on other than filling and filing reports. By your leave, Steven, I will take a look at the various thefts on the off chance this is the work of an agent – or a minion, if you would – who is acting as intermediary for someone else. Mayhap the villain is using the black market, with which I have many connections, and our thief is just fulfilling requests for exotic items that might fetch him a good price. Working models or not."

'By your leave' and 'mayhap', because Thor had learned to speak English mostly through movies, of which he preferred the ones set in medieval or earlier historical times whether semi-realistic or sheer fantasy.

"Did you leave anything for us?" Clint complained, gesturing to his chest and then over toward Natasha.

She raised her hands and shook her head, not needing to be part of this madness.

"Or are we the ones left behind to do the rest of the work while the rest of you plot out your Batman fantasy league?"

Natasha snorted into her coffee mug, then quickly popped a piece of forgotten bagel into her mouth before he could call her on it. Bruce then helped her out, by redirecting Clint's attention and pique his direction.

"Actually, I think it would be more Superman-like," Bruce offered in his very mildest and, therefore, sneakiest manner. "Batman's arch villain was only the Joker and maybe the Riddler, who were more interested in beating Batman or being Bruce Wayne, not in taking over the world."

"Don't forget Catwoman," Tony reminded him, typing away furiously on his computer tablet about something, but not missing a beat of the conversation going on around him.

Bruce shook his head and added a gesture of negation that almost dislodged Tony from where he had seated himself on the edge of Bruce's desk, his feet resting on the arm of Bruce's chair. "She chose her life of crime mainly to get attention after her initial revenge, Batman's attention specifically," he protested. "Classic acting out and self destructive tendencies that would have most likely taken another form if Batman hadn't existed. Lex Luthor on the other hand, as Superman's arch nemesis, was definitely out to take over the world."

In this, Bruce spoke with his own absolute authority, not so much on comic book storylines, but psychology, a minor interest of his even now when he'd left his life of research and academia behind after 9/11. Bruce claimed he'd left behind Dr. Banner, a top molecular biologist because he wanted to make a real difference in the world, an immediate one. Most likely, that was even true.

Natasha also knew that Bruce thought becoming a cop could cure his anger management problems. The funny thing was that it had, to an extent, since most people learned to control their temper when they had ready access to a gun. And Bruce had turned out to be a good cop, the discipline and knack for researching he'd picked up from his earlier work transferring over quite well.

"Actually, if you believe the subtext in the first few years of that TV series about them," Tony was offering again in his ever so helpful way to the comic book debate, "there was a lot of sexual sublimation and acting out between Clark and Lex too."

"Aren't we getting ahead of ourselves?" Natasha felt she needed to protest before things got even further out of hand, turning her appeal on Steve as the sanest one amongst them. "This is a
tremendous amount of speculation as well as directed manpower over something that not only might not mean anything, but also probably won't be our case in the first place. If you want to play around with shit on your own time, that's cool, but Clint was right about the likelihood of going a day that's crime free."

"That's a damn good question, Detective Romanova," Fury announced himself in a voice of derision. None of them had heard his door opening, nor that he, Phil and Bridge had come out of Fury's office into the bullpen.

Clint and Tony were too busy ignoring Natasha's attempt to rein them in to see the thunder in Fury's expression, the resignation in Phil's or the amusement as Bridge left the squad room, the two of them instead snickering over how red Steve had turned from Tony's comment, even as Steve was trying to turn his attention to their bosses and away from the images no doubt still running through his mind given that the embarrassment wasn't fading.

Bruce was ignoring the bosses too, instead explaining to Thor what subtext in television shows meant.

"Obviously you don't have enough to do if you have time to talk about comic book characters and gay subtext in television shows," Phil took over the admonishing for Fury. "Stark, put your feet on the floor and do it at your own desk. As for the rest of you…"

He didn't need to complete his threat. Properly chastised, they all moved back to their desks and did what was needed to look busy. All of them most likely were working too, not just pretending, even if it wasn't on something they'd been assigned. Fury stomped back into his office, muttering imprecations that, fortunately, none of them could actually make out.

"Do I want to know why you were talking about superheroes?" Phil asked as the door closed behind Fury (that just meant he could take them by surprise again) and he took his seat at his own desk.

"Actually, sir, we were talking about super-villains," came from Steve, pointing at the white board. "We were listing what we felt were the most significant thefts potentially related to the one at Columbia University last night. Just getting a jump on things if it ends up being our case, or putting together some interesting speculation for another squad, I guess."

From anyone else those words would have earned them a title of ass licker. Speaking up even when the answer might incriminate himself, however, not to mention the sir-thing, was just one more of Steve's weirdly endearing traits. Try though Phil had to dissuade him from using the sir-thing, Steve persisted, saying it was only proper and a measure of his respect.

While Clint usually laughed his ass off over, though never in front of Steve. As far as Natasha could tell, Clint probably liked Steve the best of all of the other members of the A-Squad outside of her and Phil. She also thought he and Phil had a different reason for Phil being called sir, which would make it pretty funny coming from Steve 'All-American' Rogers, if that was true.

Phil's left eye twitched, one of his few tells when he was feeling more like a cat wrangler or babysitter than a senior detective. "And why are things like tights, boots and Lycra on your list?"

"Because all super-villains have to have a cool costume?" Clint offered. "Although I don't know about pirate boots and a cape. Or those blend of colors, if he's using all the material he snatched."

The twitch started to get a little more pronounced.

"How about we shelve the plans for super-villainy for right now and just deal with the crimes that
have already been committed,” was all Phil said, however, before turning to face Steve. "Steve, you and Bruce are expected at the University. You've got the robbery. Campus security won't admit it, but there are rumors this isn't the first break in at the lab, or that other labs on site might have been targeted. Now that the theft involves a murder, the Trustees and University Senate have agreed that they can no longer keep what's going on in-house."

Steve nodded and gathered up his suit jacket from the back of his chair, but Bruce held up his hand in the standard, one minute, please, gesture. No one looked surprised, nor did Phil look pissed. Bruce always had something going on in his head and on his computer; anyone who rode with him usually ended up with handfuls of scrap paper, napkins and even torn paper cups if that had been all that was on hand, filled with Bruce's chicken-scratches as he strove to put his thoughts down lest he forget them when something new caught his attention. Whatever he was doing now was being completed on the computer.

"Tony, Thor, go ahead and see if you can find parallels or patterns to match this theft with others,” Phil continued. "One of you might want to reach out to our brethren in Newark and see if they've got anything to match. You also might want to compile a list of people who could take the prototype from experimental to working. Stark, I assume you can manage the tech and engineering end of that while, Thor, we'd like you to use your overseas contacts to see what other countries or organizations are working on similar prototypes. Someone may be looking for a shortcut."

Those two were able to roll out immediately, not that Tony wasn't still occupied with his computer and needed Thor to pick up his over jacket and steer Tony through the doors. Tony preferred using the tablet computer he'd scratch-built over the department issue (he'd named in Jarvis), and he refused to go anywhere without it.

That just left Natasha and Clint.

"Natasha, Clint, you've got the murder direct. Natasha, while Clint meets with the ME, I want you to start on the interviews with the missing guard's co-workers, friends, and family if he has any."

Natasha was surprised at the way Phil was splitting them – frankly, that he was splitting them at all. Normally he didn't make allowances for Natasha's gender, knowing she was as skilled, tough and cynical as Clint, with just as armored a stomach when it came to gruesome crime scenes. She was happy about it in this instance, since, burned alive, but that also made her feel guilty. And just a little angry.

If nothing else, it implied that maybe Phil (and Fury) did know about her fire phobia, which was something to consider and deal with later. On the other hand, if this was somehow Phil feeling he needed to stick Clint with the worst of the duty because of something personal between the two of them, that was of more immediate concern to her, since she'd end up in the middle of a thing between the two of them, one way or the other.

Still, Natasha had a hard time believing Phil would do something like that intentionally. Unless it was a directive from someone above them (not Fury).

If that was the case, it most likely wasn't the relationship getting out of hand, but simply one of the bosses once more deciding that Clint was the least of the A-Squad, that he was, in essence, still just a high school drop-out with a GED, an ex-military grunt with a civilian badge, his conviction rate notwithstanding. There was something there, between Clint and someone at One PP, something even she hadn't been able to uncover, and it was driving her a little nuts. She figured Clint knew – maybe even Phil – but had no way to ask without revealing all of the others things she knew about her co-workers that hadn't been volunteered.
"Tasha, you're the best we have of extracting information from people without them realizing it," Phil reminded her in response to no other tell than whatever Natasha might have unwittingly let show in her expression. "For all we know, the guard is the one behind the murder and his victim is both target and his own alibi. Until we are actually sure the missing guard is the body we have in the morgue, we need to treat everyone as a potential witness as well as a suspect. We are not sure if this was a one person or more job, but there are indications it may have been an inside one."

After getting Natasha's nod of acknowledgement, Phil turned his attention to Clint. "Once you're done with Dr. Foster, go back home and get changed into something appropriate for an older student and hit the public areas. A murder on campus is big news. Find out what the students are saying and see if there really have been other incidents no one wants to tell us about. I'll be doing the same around the faculty; we can compare notes tonight over dinner."

"You're welcome to join us, Tash," Clint automatically extended the invitation to her.

Not because she was there and it would have been rude if he hadn't, she knew, but because the two of them genuinely enjoyed her company even when she felt she might be intruding on their private time.

She appreciated the offer; James would be upstate for tonight and most of tomorrow and she'd gotten used to not eating alone any more.

"I'll buy," she offered. "If you don't mind Dim Sum."

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Since it turned out the security guard lived over the bridge in New Jersey, Natasha ended up grabbing Dominican food from El Malecón once she crossed back into Washington Heights, instead of Dim Sum. The Arroz Con Calamares and Camarones for Phil (who was much more adventurous with food than Clint), and two Ensalada De Salmon A La Parrilla salads for herself and Clint, with a couple sides of fried plantains, both sweet and green to split between the three of them. Dessert would be Tres Leches for all of them, though she suspected she'd have her cake plain even if the other two added some rum to theirs; she needed to get herself back home, after all, and even if she ended up deciding to leave her car and take a cab, she wasn't getting in with a stranger while impaired anymore than she would get behind a wheel.

She let herself in the café's door with her key and took the food directly to the back, shoving Phil's into the large oven that Clint used when he decided to serve more than the small one out front could handle, and put the salads in the clear-door fridge. She wasn't surprised their was no sign of Clint despite the traffic she'd needed deal with on the GWB; he'd called an hour ago to let her know that Jane Foster had come up with something and that he was stopping by the morgue after finishing at the college. Natasha was a little surprised that Phil hadn't beaten her, but even as she was thinking that, the new bell over the door jingled and she leaned back far enough to identify Phil's arrival through the opening between front counter area and the back room.

Phil's hands were burdened with three reusable grocery bags so she quickly said hello to not startle him and moved out to offer assistance. He frowned when she took two of the bags, but this time kept his grumbling to himself. The last time he'd made noise about being fine and quite capable of managing, thank you, Natasha had only had to question if he'd thought her incompetent when he'd risen to help the day before as she'd entered the squad room balancing four coffee cups. Reminded him she'd made it up the stairs without incident carrying the same overload, so what had been his point? Reminded him that common courtesy was not coddling, even if she and Clint might still be coddling him. A little.
Inside the bags were bottles of soda, flavored water, and tea, along with a couple of bags of seventy-five-percent off, left-over Halloween candy. Those hundred piece combo bags, with different varieties of candy bars, but both including the mint patties – her favorite when she indulged.

"You suddenly develop a sweet tooth, Phil?" she had to ask as they started putting things away. She knew Clint didn't like the peanut or peanut butter-filled ones, which probably comprised over half the haul; and while Phil would eat that kind, he was no more a candy freak than she or Clint, preferring to keep himself healthy and in good shape for the job as well as for any personal satisfaction.

Phil gave her one of his rare smiles, one of the fond ones that also had him looking as if he was caught up in memories. Most of the time those memories revolved around Clint, but like the presence of the mint candy and the pomegranate-flavored bottles she also discovered; like the constant invitations to dinner, Natasha understood that this smile was a gift too, something she was granted as few others were. It made her feel warm and cared for, even if she didn't understand how she'd gained this much trust and affection so quickly.

Or at all.

"Clint is feeling guilty about missing Halloween for the neighborhood kids. Go ahead and pick out some for yourself, but the rest are going to go into a bowl on the counter for when the kids stop by."

Yeah, that was her partner, the old softie. She thought that the only reason he didn't do a regular volunteer gig with kids like Steve at the Center was because he could reach and accomplish more by opening the diner to his neighbors. That and because Clint hated anything as regimented as a schedule. Work wasn't even so much the exception; he complained about their early morning sign-ins so often that even Tony bitched about his attitude. Thankfully, their assignments and calls gave them an overall flexibility that Clint – and therefore, the rest of them – managed.

"Not tonight, I'm assuming?" Natasha asked. While she'd prefer not to have to share her friends with strangers, she couldn't complain as she'd been stranger once.

"No, tomorrow or the next day will be soon enough," Phil agreed. "Tonight belongs to just the three of us, no case, no squad, no Fury."

"Oh, now you've jinxed it," she scolded. "Though I'm not sure which would be worse, getting a call from Tony or Fury."

Phil shook his head at her and guided her upstairs to the living area proper. They hung their coats and Natasha accepted a pullover and sweats from Clint's drawer that he dug out for her to change into. Tonight was for dinner and a movie, or maybe one of the board games that Natasha had always thought were for children but had found herself quite enjoying when she'd been introduced to them. A night for oversized, comfortable clothing and, yes, even an overindulgence of chocolate. It was a night for friendship and closeness; maybe not a sharing of secrets, but at least the telling of some stories – the telling of themselves.

"Did you know you were sending me to Jersey?" she called out from where she'd gone into the bathroom. She'd left the door partially open in part so they could carry on a conversation, and because she had had any real modesty trained out of her years ago. Not that she figured Phil would look any way, even if he wasn't likely changing into something beyond work clothes himself.

"You're Russian. You're not allow to have a New Yorker's disdain for Jersey," was his response,
part of it indeed muffled from where something had either come off or gone on.

"Can I have disdain for the traffic I had to deal with?" she countered despite him being right. She really didn't have anything against New Jersey and had even defended one or two inhabitants of the Garden State in the past. She was only complaining now because of the time wasted – because the friends and family of the victim had been no help in puzzling out any direct motive or suspect, but it would be in poor taste to blame those who'd been grieving for her own frustration.

It was also just a little awkward to be here in Clint's place without Clint and with Phil. Talking about the case was better than dwelling on whether she should really be here hanging out.

"You can always bitch about traffic," Phil allowed as she came out of the room.

For a moment they both froze, Phil in the process of pulling on a sweater that looked softer than James' cat, Snow (its fur was pitch black with no lighter markings), her from not being able to stop staring at the scarring across his chest. This was the first time she'd seen directly the results of the shooting. She'd been shot before herself, three times in fact, but she hadn't required further surgery once the bullets had been removed. Phil had required not only the initial surgery to remove the bullet, but also a Thoracotomy to repair the penetration tear of his lung, and then a follow-up to insert plates to aid in the recovery for his two fractured ribs.

Phil's resilience still amazed Natasha. Loki had fired off a full clip, hitting Phil twice in the chest. He'd been lucky that the bullets had been of a small caliber and had gone first through glass (as well as traveling nearly twenty feet). When they'd finally reached Phil, they'd penetrated no further than a rib and lung. It hadn't been luck that had followed, however. Phil had managed to maintain his composure well enough to keep upright and the presence of mind to locate a sheet of plastic to use for the pneumothorax overtaking him despite his decreasing oxygen intake. He'd then slid down the wall yet remained seated when shock and blood loss also began to affect him instead of collapsing to the floor and further compromising his breathing. Afterward, when he'd needed further surgeries, Fury had used a personal favor to get Phil transferred to Mt. Sinai for video assisted thoracic surgery, resulting in significantly less invasive pain and trauma, as well as leaving him with less scarring.

Now, just a few months later, Phil was back at work and showing no ill affects – well, not allowing himself to show any ill affects. Such as letting anyone other than Clint to see his scarring.

Natasha understood. She'd been the same way a few times during her service in Russia. But for her – and her handlers – injury meant weakness, meant she might become a liability or at least have diminished value. Phil didn't have that hanging over him; everyone knew Fury couldn't run his house without Phil's steady hand and good eye. Phil wasn't measured by his usefulness or –

She was an idiot. Of course he was, at least within his own mind. Everyone wanted to be useful, to have value. Everyone worried about appearing weak even if their performance wasn't measured in lives and favors. For Phil – for any cop who planned the job to be their last career – the fear of being retired out on disability was something they lived with constantly. That outcome had been a real possibility in Phil's case. That didn't even take into account the possibility becoming a burden. An… obligation to Clint, had Phil not recovered as well as he had. This soon, Phil's scars were simply reminders of what he almost lost, not evidence of what he had survived.

"Most men look at my chest more than my face," she started speaking, while also removing the sweatshirt she'd just put on. "Because of this, ten years ago I was sent on an op involving a suspected Georgian anarchist."

"Natasha, what? You don't – "
His tone was all question and surprise, completely uncomfortable, which might have been a first in the time since she'd met him. Natasha ignored it.

"He resented my methods, decided to make sure I would never be successful in seducing men in the future," she continued. She did meet Phil's stricken look, however, and hoped her own expression conveyed her ease in giving this up as well as her faith in him not to hold anything against her as she unclasped the front of her bra.

His gasp was not unexpected and she didn't need to look down to see what he'd reacted to. She never needed to look to remember the feel of the blade as it sliced downward, bisecting her nipple like he was going to peel her apart to reach her heart.

"He changed his mind about just disfiguring," she explained and made a vague motion toward the side of her breast. "He decided he'd get more satisfaction out of cutting it off."

Phil made another incoherent noise but he took an involuntary step forward, not away. He also raised his hand and asked, nearly breathless, "May I?"

"As long as you grant me the same courtesy."

He flinched at that, but then gave her a rueful smile and nodded.

"James was the first man I remember who looked at me without disgust or pity," she told him, shivering as much at the memory as from Phil's soft, gentle fingers that traced the arc that started at his two o'clock and ran down to five. "He was the first to say they were evidence of my courage and strength, not of failure."

James had his own scars, his more horrific than hers. He'd lost his entire arm at the shoulder during his time in the Army. But that had just lent his words more weight and allowed her to believe him. With him, for the first time, she'd not dissolved into doubt and second-guessing her decision to forego any cosmetic surgery to hide the ugliness as one more hope for a relationship died.

"Clint is the second man who seemed neither repulsed nor too eager to grant me his presence and fix me," she added, trying for off-handedness as she did her own tactile mapping of Phil's scars lest he get too caught up in the story of hers.

It worked.

"He's seen you naked?" Phil asked with a stutter, no trace of his normal composure although there was only a shallow undercurrent of something not quite full-on jealousy with a boss's concern and disappointment that he might have to deal with a harassment suit in his future.

Natasha laughed and steadied her palm over the unevenness of his flesh. Not to hide but to acknowledge it. "It was when we first met; that first night. If you remember, I was investigating whether some cops were taking advantage of certain of the working girls. Fury pulled me directly off a street corner and took me with him to the diner without giving me a chance to change into something more appropriate for telling a guy his partner had been murdered. Then, instead of going to the crime scene from there, Clint took me to the precinct and the locker room. He had his own ideas of appropriateness for notifying Dr. Foster about her mentor's death, and grabbed a set of spare jeans and a t-shirt from his own locker which he proceeded to shove into my arms."

She gave another laugh, though silent this time, at both the memory and at how Phil started to relax under her hand.

"Since he'd embarrassed and pissed me off, I figured I'd do the same and just started stripping right
there in front of him, taking off everything but my panties. All he said as I shoved the outfit, including the push-up bra right back into his hands, was that he hoped I didn't make a habit out of push-ups or padded bras. That my breasts were just fine without any augmentation. And then he offered to also help me work on my makeup technique since I was giving whores a bad name.”

Phil couldn't help laughing at that, more heartily than she'd heard since he'd been shot, and he didn't fold over or even pause to catch his breath or clutch at his chest from pain. When he got control of the laughter, he let his own embarrassment over Clint's being such a dick show.

"Well, Clint has his own way of dealing with grief," he tried to explain and apologize at the same time.

"Oh, I know," Natasha agreed and stopped any further apologies by tapping her fingers against his scar tissue. "I found it refreshing, actually, being treated no differently than I imagined he treated anyone else. He'd seen the scarring but his only overt reaction was a scowl, then he more subtly challenged me in return, letting me get angry instead of defensive. Knowing now that he is gay more or less explains it, but I don't really think he would have reacted much differently had he been wholly straight."

"No, I don't think he would have, but Clint is actually bi-sexual himself and he does find you extremely attractive. Your looks as well as your…person." For just a second Phil let his hand curl around her breast. "I do to; if you weren't in a relationship with James, I imagine we would have asked if you would like to join us."

Natasha could feel herself start to blush, because of how she'd fallen for a stereotype as much as from the pleasure of such a compliment.

"As far as this goes," Phil continued, shifting his hand back to the tips of his fingers hovering about her scars, "Clint sees more than most any one I know, in people as well as crime scenes. Everyone has some kind of scarring, whether it's hidden or visible. Even Steve Rogers and Tony Stark. To judge someone because of that…"

She nodded. "Our scars are our badges of survival and worth honoring."

"Whoa! Hey, sorry. You're supposed to hang a sock or one of your excessive number of ties on the door knob. Or, you know, like at least close the door."

Natasha swallowed a sudden swell of giddiness while her hair mostly muted Phil's laugh from where he dropped his head against hers. Clint's remarkably obnoxious sense of timing had become known to her, but this time it was priceless. She hadn't known he had such impressive skills in sneaking up quietly since he never stayed quiet.

"If we'd done that, we'd then have to waste time talking you into the threesome," Natasha shot back, unwilling to pass up the opportunity to tease back, especially now that she knew he'd at least thought about it with her.

"Seriously? Okay," and with that, Clint started his own stripping.

"No, she is not serious," Phil chided, pulling back from Natasha but not away. Not until, as unflappable and as always the perfect gentleman, he reaffixed the clasp of her bra (though he let her settle her breasts into the cups without offering assistance). He then finally completed his own dressing.

When he then moved to more properly greet Clint, Natasha reclaimed the sweatshirt she'd dropped at some point in her interaction with Phil to also finish clothing herself.
"Are we eating downstairs or up here?" she asked once they broke their kiss. Clint was still doing his own touching, one hand snaked up under the sweater while his other was mindlessly petting.

"Up here," Phil decided. "I'll help you get the food and bring it up here, while Clint changes and cleans off the table."

Clint's pout was for form's sake only and his expression changed quickly enough to gratitude when he managed to drag his gaze back from eying Phil's ass as he headed down the stairs to look toward Natasha.

She gave him a nod of acknowledgment, feeling her own gratitude for finding such friends that she could give herself to in such a fashion and actually help instead of providing them a form of ammunition to use against her.

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*Good morning Second Squad, this is Dispatch. Our thoughts and thanks to all of you who served or have had loved ones serving on this day of remembrance. If you are marching later in today's parade, you rock. If you will be working here with the rest of us, a handful from dispatch are going to tonight's candlelight procession down Pier 86 and would be happy for the company. Let's hope the bad guys also remember today's meaning, or in the immortal words of John F. Kennedy: As we express our gratitude, we must never forget that the highest appreciation is not to utter words, but to live by them.*

"Have you ever marched in the parade?" Natasha asked Clint. as their radio fell silent.

Surprisingly, he blushed and didn't look her direction. "I was going to," he answered. "My first year with Fury. He was marching, so I thought I'd score some points if I did too but in the end I punked out. Didn't even go over to watch it. Back when I was a uni, I worked the crowd detail a couple of times. Let me tell you, that parade is a lot better duty than doing the crowds at the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. Even if I was inclined to have kids, I would never take them to that fucking zoo."

He finally turned toward her and asked: "How about you? Russia has that big May Day parade – "

"International Worker's Day," she corrected him. "Well, actually in Russia we call it the Day of Spring and Labour," she explained when he gave her a blank expression. "It is a celebration of the proletariat, a union worker. And, no, I never marched."

She'd attended, though. More than one and always on the arm of one of one of the lesser government leaders, never as the same woman, however, except that she was always there as someone's reward. A trophy.

"Spring *and* labor? I suppose that explains all the tanks and soldiers, though, not really," he added, shaking his head.

"Typical American. You are mixing up our holidays. The military parade is for Victory Day – V-E Day – which falls a week later. The May Day you are thinking of as the celebration of Spring, is based on the old pagan holiday, Beltane. That is the one with bonfires, maypoles, and lords and ladies and celebrated in many western countries though some, too, also see it as a day to honor unions and workers as we do. You do know that many of your holidays are based on pre-Christian holy days, yes? Christmas, Halloween – "

"I'm a cop," he interrupted, but with a twinkle and a smirk. "We don't get holidays because the
bad guys don't take holidays. Case in point, we're here."

Here was the crime scene they'd been sent to when the call had come through Dispatch. Dead body in an alleyway, typical enough this time of year just due to weather and homelessness, but this one the unis were sure had been murder.

Going by the vehicles Clint parked next to, the ME was already on scene. So, too, had Tony and Thor beaten them here, although Thor was using the opportunity to chat up his girl friend by the looks of it instead of doing his own or letting her do her job. Tony was talking to a couple of the uniformed officers, but they and everyone else stopped to turn and look at them as she and Clint walked up.

Okay, that was a little different. So was Thor breaking off from talking to his Lady Jane, to meet them before they reached the body.

Natasha was beginning to get a bad feeling, but if this was something like the Eric Selvig murder, Fury or Phil would have been on hand, assuming the four of them hadn't been shooting the shit at the precinct just before she and Clint had been sent out. For a moment all Natasha could think of was the body being James', which had her involuntarily reaching – clutching – at Clint's arm. But then she could see a turned foot visible behind Thor, one decided feminine even without the five inch spiked heel it wore.

"It is a prostitute," Thor told them before Natasha could worry about the body's identity any further. "A couple of the other girls identified her as someone they recognized, but didn't know her name as she doesn't normally work this area. She had your card in her purse, Natasha. So we didn't want you to walk up on the body cold."

Natasha gave him a nod for the consideration, although she was surprised at the deference being shown by everyone else on the scene. While Thor was certainly courteous to the point of absurdity at times, Tony didn't have a discreet bone in his body. And most unis rarely had more than a basic human sympathy for dead street walkers, given the commonness of the occurrence as well as the typical run-ins between the two groups.

"Are we expecting SVU to come in and steal our crime scene?" Clint asked.

Thor shook his head. "No sign of sexual assault. No sign of recent sexual activity at all according to Dr. Foster," he told them, looking just as puzzled as Natasha felt at such a discovery. Working girls didn't get time off for holidays all that often either. Not unless they were sick enough that their clients might become concerned.

"Cause and time of death?" Clint asked this of Jane Foster, who'd come up to stand next to Thor, but neither of them touching or doing anything that might compromise their professionalism in front of outsiders or the inevitable gawking civilians.

"Single gun-shot wound to the back of the head. I'd say from at least a 38', though I can't be certain until I remove the bullet and Betty confirms the ballistics. Livor mortis and temperature put her death between four and five hours ago. She didn't suffer," Jane added uncharacteristically, though she aborted what looked like a desire to reach out and touch Natasha's arm in some kind of sympathy or solidarity.

Natasha gave Jane a nod too, not sure what else she should do. She and Jane weren't exactly friends, but they were friendly when their mutual jobs or social interactions with Thor intersected. Normally Jane appeared rather distracted, by her work or whatever research she was undertaking at a given time and visits to her morgue were often uncomfortable, not just because Natasha didn't like going to the morgue. Jane in the morgue was quite a different person than she was at a crime
scene, much more clinical and detached as well as distracted, often giving the impression that they were interrupting her.

Natasha's own reactions in both situations were different too; she was much more used to seeing bodies in their trauma state of a crime scene. By the time they were simply hollowed-out, stitched-together mannequins, Natasha had a hard time reconciling that the body had once been a person, something that, so far, hadn't changed now that she had become a more frequent visitor to the morgue in the course of her job. Death was personal, especially death caused by another hand. Especially death caused by her own hand, yet Jane Foster and her peers did their jobs by treating death impersonally, and that was a mindset Natasha perhaps understood, but normally eschewed, for that way led to monsters and madness in her old profession.

This, now, was about her new profession; she was a detective, not an assassin or spy. Natasha couldn't help thinking that this murder might be related to her previous work as a spy, however. Not while she'd still been Russian, but from her time with IAB. As far as she knew, the only cards she'd handed out to prostitute had been during her investigation into abusive and corrupt Vice officers. If this was part of that, it implied she might not have done her job well enough and uncovered all of the participants in that nest of wretches.

"This isn't your fault," Clint leaned over to tell her as they left Thor and Jane behind to finally move to the body.

She shot him a look, angry for him saying such a thing, yet more angry at herself for having telegraphed her feelings. She certainly wasn't perfect, had made mistakes with the best of them. She also didn't normally dwell on guilt and she never failed to own up to her mistakes, so she didn't need someone else – even her partner – feeling like he had to excuse her –

Right. Not her guilt, but his. For having been the reason she'd been pulled from the IAB case. Never minding that he'd still helped her with the investigation, both of them working off book in whatever downtime they'd found while exonerating Eric Selvig and identifying Loki as his killer. Clint had never met a guilt he didn't try to embrace, the fuzzy-hearted idiot.

"It won't be your fault either," she said along with giving him a punch to his shoulder. "Four abusive cops are behind bars, already one more than the girls had identified. If we missed uncovering a fifth, no one would have been able to identify him. Whoever took over the investigation after I was pulled off and traded to Fury certainly didn't – "

"Isn't that the girlfriend of our Columbia University security guard?" Natasha interrupted herself when Clint knelt down and pulled back the sheet from their victim's face.

"Mindy Winters, yeah, I think she is," Clint agreed. He pulled the rest of the sheet from the body so they could get a look at the clothing she'd been wearing.

Definitely hooker chic; in addition to the fuck-me (fuck-you) pumps, she had on a black leather micro-mini skirt, fishnet stockings, and some sort of fur type wrap over a lacy demi-bra. At first glance, the fur looked real – actual Russian sable – and Natasha knelt down herself for a feel. It was real.

"This wasn't a robbery gone bad. The wrap is real and even is someone else thought it might not be, I don't see them leaving it behind on the off chance they were wrong. Something like this sells for two grand or more. It might be harder to pawn than some things, but there are always places."

Clint was nodding. He looked up at the group hovering just out of earshot and gestured for someone to come closer. "Someone found Natasha's card, so I'm assuming there is a purse?"
"Money was still there, but no credit cards, ID or phone," Tony informed them as he and Thor sauntered over. "So who is she?"

Natasha sat back on her heels. "Our dead security guard's girlfriend."

Thor looked for a moment as if he didn't get it, but by his question he was obvious picking up on it as well as something else. "If she had a beau, why would she be out dressed to pick up other men?"

"They weren't living together," Clint filled in the other two. "And even if they had been, being just a girlfriend, she wouldn't have necessarily inherited anything. But didn't she have a job, Tasha?"

She shrugged. "She was a TA for another department. Do TA's make any money?"

"They can," Tony answered. "If she was a grad student. If she was only an undergrad, she could have been getting credit hours or volunteering for brownie points. The real question is not why is a woman with a steady boyfriend now tricking, but why would anyone who could afford sable need to trick? You're sure it's real?"

Natasha rolled her eyes. "Yes, I am sure, Tony. And no, I'm not going to tell you why I know," she forestall his next question. "To answer yours, however, Thor, some women actual enjoy being a prostitute. There may even be some men who, when they say they don't mind that she keeps doing it after they get together, they mean it. I imagine those men at least enjoy the extra income she's bringing in."

"Our Gerard Coulter could have been her pimp," Clint offered.

"I don't think she was lying when she said he'd been her boyfriend – "

"Not mutually exclusive," Tony pointed out; not that Natasha didn't keep talking over him,

"Maybe she wasn't a prostitute, but a dancer, like for private parties. A little dangerous looking for clients for that on the street, but that would explain the recent lack of sexual activity even for her looking like this. Coulter telling his friends his girl is an exotic dancer would pretty much cement his standing as top dog, right?" she then asked.

She'd already been called out for falling for stereotypes once this week to that she didn't want to show any more defaults in her understanding of American culture and psyches.

Thor spoke before anyone answered her question. "Is any of this speculation really relevant? What we should be asking is why this poor girl was murdered. And whether it has anything to do with her boyfriend's case. With our greater case. Surely as a coincidence, these two murders stretch all bounds of credibility?"

Not how Natasha would have phrased it, but he does have a point. Mindy Winters hadn't told Natasha anything of interest about her boyfriend, the University, or anything else, frankly. She was still fairly certain that Mindy Winters hadn't known anything interesting. Of course, if that was actual truth instead of speculation, that didn't preclude someone else thinking just the opposite. That Mindy had known something the police would find interesting or useful and so shut her up.

The murderer would also then have spent some time tracking Mindy's movements to know to find her here, dressed as a hooker, dancer or whatever. If someone had been stalking Mindy for a time, someone else might have been witness to that.
"Do we have enough people to canvass the neighborhood and talk to potential witnesses?" Clint asked, once again showing an ability to read her mind.

Or he was simply doing his job, which at the moment was investigating Mindy's murder whether it was part of a larger crime or not.

Either way, they had answers to find.

Second Squad, this is Dispatch. All is quiet on all fronts so far, but we did have a winner last night in our local Darwin Awards. The perp decided to wear a mask, tights and a cape to his break-in of a local stereo shop. He ended up hanging himself when his cape snagged on the skylight frame. A reminder then, that Edna Mode had it right. If you do feel you must wear a cape, always remember not to use spandex for your fashion choice. At least a nice cotton or linen has a chance of ripping under your body weight. And, for God's sake, make it detachable instead of sewing it into your bodysuit.

"Natasha, guys, I think I might have something."

They all started to move toward Bruce's desk, even Fury, but Bruce waved them off and did something with his computer. In the next few moments a map appeared on all of their desktop screens. Natasha saw dots and flags and several differently colored lines linking them in different sequences, but could make no more sense of it. She didn't think she was alone in that. Even Tony's attention was caught up in trying to figure out what Bruce had discovered.

"Okay, so we've accepted the super-villain scenario is real and there have been break-ins, vandalism, thefts, and murders in his name, whatever that turns out to be. He hasn't come out with some kind of video or threat given to the radio, newspapers or television reporters, but we are all agreeing he has hired, drafted, seduced or coerced… minions into working for him."

That earned Bruce a few nods. They had figured out a lot of puzzle pieces in the last few days, discovering the overall picture to be much larger than they'd speculated when they'd first started to piece it together. They still didn't know the full size, however, or even what the picture would ultimately show them. For now they had tiny sections, no more than half-finished, that simply added to the confusion.

The Columbia University murder and theft were the key. Finally identified as the security guard, Jane Foster had confirmed that he'd been killed by a flamethrower, but then further burned with something else, from the inside. Something like an industrial laser, one of the missing ones but given a greater power source. Tony had told them that if it had been one of those lasers, it had to have been destroyed in the use, that the lenses and diodes would not have been able to handle the added wattage for the time it would have taken to rotisserize the guard. Natasha simply knew it would be a while before she could eat shawarma again.

They'd caught some kids next, the ones who'd been paid to harass first responders with laser pointers or break windows then told to leave pieces of glass in different places where they'd find a five dollar bill for the trouble. Nothing traceable or memorable that the kids could give them, other than someone was sending out orders to minions, who in turn recruited kids to provide the distractions. Fury had arranged for a To Catch A Predator type of switch with a young enough looking officer to get involved, which in turn, had led them to arresting one of the minions.

They got hold of another couple, though one only after he'd died during the commission of his crime. The dead one, as well as the one that Thor had accidentally put in a coma, had been found
wearing ridiculous comic book type costumes. The one hiring the kids had agreed to a polygraph and during Natasha's turn at interrogation, he readily admitted his guilt in paying the kids, but denied knowing who had hired him. Even without the confirmation of the polygraph, they decided he was telling the truth; he simply wasn't smart enough to be one of the bigger fish.

Still, from the trails the minions had left, the squad next tracked down three separate seamstresses who'd been hired over the internet to make costumes to spec. Each of them had also turned out to simply be women looking for a way to make some extra money in the down economy. Each of them had been paid in cash sent through the mail, again in small bills, half up front and half when the costumes had been mailed to a dead drop.

Spandex was pretty liberal when it came to sizing; they did no tailoring, creating costumes in basic sizes like the kinds sold in shops around Halloween. After they'd answered the on-line ads, they'd received the yards of fabric, pattern suggestions and a handful of mailbox address to send the costumes to when they were done. Three of the earliest commissions had included capes, but each of the three seamstresses had completed ten costumes. There was no way of knowing whether all thirty costumes had been distributed to thirty different individuals or if some were for replacements or future recruits. Nor could they be certain on three people had been hired, though by the amount of fabric that had been stolen, there shouldn't be more than one unidentified seamstress or tailor.

That's where the trails had ended, however, as the two involved mailboxes had been closed out by their users before Steve or Bruce could set up a stake out, and all contact information provided when they had first been rented had been falsified.

So, if Bruce had found them some way to start putting the disparate chunks of puzzle together –

Bruce was smiling, even preening a little under the attention, though he wasn't a whore for it like Tony. "Taking into account that our mastermind is purposely leaving some sort of trail, I think we can also assume that he does, ultimately, want to be found out. Not for giving up his secret identify, of course, but to be acknowledged that he is a threat."

"Great, so we know he's a showboat and has an ego almost on par with Stark," Fury growled from where he stood looking over Steve's shoulder. "How does that tell us anything new?"

Natasha understood that one. "He has to have left calling cards then. Maybe not from the beginning, but certainly once his plans started to gel."

"There were no cards on the scene," Thor protested.

"Not literally, Hang Ten, but something for someone he hopes is almost as smart as he is to figure out. Like Tony Stark," Tony said, pointing at himself. "Or his trusty sidekick, Dr. Bruce Banner," he added, seeming to remember at the last moment that he hadn't figured out where Bruce was going with this yet. Tony once more began peering at his computer screen, duplicating the map onto a smartpad as well as on Jarvis, so he could isolate three of the differently colored lines between Bruce's marked points.

Bruce nodded, removing his glasses to wipe at them with his shirt tail, something he normally did when he was feeling self-conscious but also vindicated. "Which I think I have done. This screen is all of the reports of thefts, vandalism and attacks by kids over the last six months," he said of the first map he brought up. "Too many to make sense of, so I set in some parameters. Looking at just those involving broken glass, the dead pets, and the drivers who were blinded."

He typed a little and suddenly the map cleared quite a bit, still too many points of data for Natasha to see any kind of visual pattern, but obviously Bruce was going somewhere with this and she was fascinated. She'd always wanted to be a code breaker when she was little, but her mind saw things
shaded in gray, not ciphers.

"I also went back and added in the reports of car alarms loud enough to violate the noise ordinances – "

"Car alarms?" Clint asked Phil quietly, from where he was leaning against Phil to share his screen.

"Light and sonic disturbances. Two of the four functions of your super-villain weapons from last week," Phil answered him. Answered the rest of them too, although Tony was beginning to look like he was catching up to Bruce.

"If you overlay those incidents to the reports of tech thefts, even if they were things like stereo speakers and car batteries along with the big stuff, forty-seven percent of the incidents match."

New hollowed squares showed up on the map and then Bruce did something to make the unmatched points go away. What was left was a series of eighteen points, staggered throughout eight, no, nine different streets, all within a ten mile radius around Columbia University.

"Son of a bitch!" Tony exclaimed. "So where are the numbers?"

Bruce smiled and gave him a look that had Tony frowning and then looking eagerly at the rest of them like a kid waiting for everyone to open their first Christmas present so he could move on to his next.

Obviously, he was going to have a long wait, because not even Phil or Fury looked like they had figured out as much as Tony had.

"Okay, fine, I'll give you all a hint," Tony huffed, when Bruce still didn't spill his next secret and give Tony the payoff he was looking for. "Look again at each of the streets. At the names of each of the streets."

"Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Amsterdam," Steve read aloud. "I don't get it."

"Broadway, Fifth Avenue, Amsterdam," Tony repeated, then went on: "Duke Ellington Boulevard, Cathedral Parkway – I guess we're just going with the first word or leaving off the types of streets." He paused and once more looked disappointed. "Not even with that clue?" He sounded despondent.

"Anderson, Clay, Eagle, Freedom Plaza, they all start with early letters in the alphabet." Phil didn't make it sound like a question, but his face said he still wasn't sure.

"Not just early letters, but all of them, A to F," Bruce finally spoke up, willing, it appeared, to put Tony out of his misery and fill in the rest of them at the same time. "Like Tony said, there should also be numbers. I discounted the times of the incidents, since most of the crimes were discovered after the fact so we'd have no way of knowing when the crimes actually occurred. The number of the month also didn't give me what I was looking for, since nearly half of these occurred in the last two and I needed single digits. Which we got, when you put in the dates of the incidents while leaving out the months. In addition to falling on streets whose names all started at the beginning of the alphabet, each of these crimes occurred over the first nine days of the last three months, some of them doubling up instead of our guy waiting for say, the eighteenth or the thirtieth. That gave us the numbers zero through nine, and the letters A through F."

"Well, shit, it's hexadecimal code."

Tony applauded; his expression a mixture of glee and pleasure that one of the slow kids figured it out. "Give our fearless leader a cigar."
Fury started to grumble, but Steve spoke up before anything more was exchanged between the two.

"I know I've heard of it before, but I don't remember in what context. What are hexadecimal codes?"

Tony opened his mouth to answer, but then looked to Bruce, prompting Natasha to make a note to herself to send Pepper some chocolates or maybe suggest they get together over the weekend and go shoe shopping or something. No one here had ever managed to make a dent against Tony's need to self-aggrandize, but obviously someone else had if Tony was now deferring.

Bruce, however, simply acknowledged Tony's gesture, then gave him a physical one that conveyed *be my guest*. Tony grinned back at him and then was off.

"Base sixteen, my flag waiving friend. Zero through nine and the letters A through F, like Bruce said. The letters represent the numbers ten through fifteen. It's one of the ways computer programmers represent computer memory, all those bits, nybles and bytes. If you then combine your sixteen characters in turn into two character subsets, you can represent all the letters, numbers, lots of punctuation. Some of the two digit subsets and the sixteen single characters represent standardized computer commands like end of text and escape. If you *multiple* two characters subsets together, you have codes for the computer's color palette."

"So you guys are saying our guy has planned his crimes, picked the locations and the days while potentially skipping easier targets, just so he could write out a message in computer code." Clint didn't sound convinced. "Who in the hell does that?"

Tony laughed and gave the obvious answer. "Someone who thinks he is smarter than all of the rest of you." Clint shot him an irritated look that Tony ignored like normal.

"Of course, now that we've figured it out, it seems pretty anticlimactic and rather pedestrian."

Phil, in turn, ignored Tony's also shamelessly normal reaction and asked Bruce: "Do you have the message translated then?"

Bruce looked down at his computer, at something that was going on in the corner of his machine that didn't show up on the rest of their monitors. "Yes, and no," he told them. "When taking the incidents in a linear fashion, first event followed by the next, it's gibberish." He shrugged. "I guess he didn't want to make it too easy for us. So I've got another program running that will take each hex combination and start fashioning words."

He then pointed his finger Tony's direction. "I hadn't thought about the colors, but that might make it work better, and might explain a few more incidents I threw out because they violated the base 16 hypothesis, like Second Avenue and Sixth. It's possible he threw in the number representations of those roads, not the first letter. That's going to open up the possibilities, of course, but overall, it would account for some of the things that looked like repetitions."

He looked up to see everyone staring at him and bit his lip. "Give my program another hour?"

With that Fury pushed back from behind Steve and nodded. "Everyone take that hour and head out to lunch," he ordered. "Out of the building and, yes, even you, Rogers. I don't care if you brought something in." He gestured to the set of desks and personnel around the corner of their room, at the rest of the detectives that shared their shift if not their part of the bullpen and closeness. "Sitwell's kids can handle whatever might come up while you're out."

Natasha supposed that made them Phil's kids, with all of them being Fury's Furies, and the
division still felt strange to her even after seven months of dealing with it. Such a division was expected between the different shifts, all the more so when a case might cause one or the other to intrude on the other squad's case work. Normally, though, all of them on the same shift were comrades, were interchangeable, with whichever partnership next on the schedule taking the crimes as they came up. She thought it was to the department's detriment that within the first shift they were essentially two different teams, working two separate sets of cases that Fury, Phil and Jasper Sitwell parceled out.

Still, the structure of the building had lent itself to that as much as the personalities involved, there not being any one room large enough to house all fourteen of them together without at least one wall to separate them into two, and that not including Fury and his office. As they all played well enough together when they had to, she supposed she saw Fury's point in making it into as much of a strength as he could, not even above playing the two squads off as rivals like something out of a high school competition.

It wasn't like the city had the money for renovations, nor would the Brass at One PP have authorized such an expense even if they did. Natasha wasn't about to complain that what little money the Second received in the budget stayed earmarked for upgrades in technology, for weapons and their Kevlar – instead of being wasted on a decades old building with leaky, noisy pipes, sketchy heating and air conditioning, and shitty coffee.

Tony and Thor were first out the door. That didn't surprise her. Thor really liked to eat and loved the variety that embodied New York City cuisine, whereas Tony claimed having to stay in the bullpen for hours at a time made him itch. Tony, for one, would have loved to see some building improvements, and had even gone so far as to offer to fund them personally. He'd quite probably been serious too, though no one had taken him that way.

Clint wasn't that far behind them, though he did wait at the door for Natasha and Phil to catch up. While he was great at sitting patiently during surveillance or general intelligence gathering, he had his own difficulties with being stuck in the bullpen, where everything was dependent upon computer programs and data sifting. Such things were only a nominal part of Clint's skill set, something he'd learned to manage (probably more due to Phil's patient hand than from any real desire), but his strength came with his observational skills, in overhearing things and picking up ticks in people's body language or the way a room could contradict its inhabitant. Most of the time, if she and Clint were in the squad room, it meant they'd run out of leads and were waiting for someone else to give them something to go on; Natasha's own best skill was ferreting out someone's secrets just in talking to them.

It turned out that Tony and Thor were waiting, though they'd moved down the corridor toward the stairs so as not to have everybody bunched up at the bullpen entrance. Steve and Bruce rounded out their merry little band, though Natasha begged off for a moment as they reached the bottom floor and headed off to drag Darcy out to join them.

"I am tired of being the only woman at the table with the rest of you," she snapped at Tony when he bitched at the delay, her look a warning for him not to push it as she had quite a bit more she could say about the general manners of six guys operating basically unchecked – since they normally treated her just like one of them. Or about Tony more specifically. She actually preferred being treated as one of them, of course, and would have castrated anyone who didn't agree that hers were the biggest balls of all, but playing Wendy to their Lost Boys did get tiresome occasionally.

Her grand plan still in play with regard to Steve and Darcy. With the increasing concerns over their current case, she wasn't sure if they'd managed a second or third date, but from what she'd found out, the first had gone well enough. Lunch now would be an opportunity to get them
moving forward.

She aimed a warning look at Clint, too, to make sure he didn't give her intentions away.

Since Darcy was the guest, they made her pick the restaurant, which no doubt saved them a round of arguments. They were still somewhat apprehensive, as Darcy was in truth a grad student spending time working police dispatch while her Thesis Advisor finished a stint in the current White House Administration (she was majoring in Poly Sci). Money wasn't so much the issue, but she was experimental, and wasn't afraid to try anything once. That had translated into some truly unfortunate lunches – and drinks after hours – yet also some wonderful discoveries. Somewhat like Thor, Darcy had decided it was her duty to sample every restaurant that had opened within their basic environs, and she preferred not to go alone to the more esoteric ones.

She'd obviously been keeping Massawa in reserve. Its Ethiopian and Eritrean menu had plenty of vegetarian dishes for Bruce to choose from, as well as lamb in addition to the usual meats and seafood common to the American diet. Natasha was rather surprised she hadn't happened upon it herself before now, but with James living over in Astoria, her own home in Soho and Clint's loft/diner being up in Mott Haven in the Bronx, she had quite the variety of food choices without needing to go exploring too much around work. It wasn't like they all that often had the time to actually sit down and eat in anything other than in their cars while on shift, anyway, so too often meals were fast food or something wilted brought in from home.

As was their wont, they each ordered something different so that they could sample from everyone's plates, with Steve and Clint both ordering vegetarian in this instance along with Bruce. The salmon was the most expensive on the menu, so of course that was Tony's pick, while Thor chose chicken, Phil and Darcy two beef dishes, and leaving Natasha to try the spicy lamb Tsebhi Beghe. Fury was also good to his word, and none of them got a call out before they were done, even though they ran ten minutes over (part of those ten minutes had been spent by Phil waiting for the dark meat Tsebhi Derho to take back for their boss).

Bruce's program was still running by the time they made it back in, but between shaking off the snow, hanging up their coats and getting coffee and whatever else to take back to their desks, his computer pinged just as he sat down with his afternoon tea. Tony didn't even pretend to head for his desk before, instead following Bruce and ending up behind him. Fury just uncovered his to-go plate and ate while standing to Bruce's other side.

"Huh. Only two thousand, five hundred and twenty-three single letter and common word combinations. That's a lot better than I thought," Bruce told them as he reviewed the raw data.

Natasha wasn't the only one who blanched at the notion that twenty-five hundred combinations was a good thing.

"I'll send everyone the list," Bruce went on, "and we can spend the next couple of hours playing word jumble. When you get them, remember that we may not have found all the data points in the code, so there will be blank characters. The program was instructed to list the variations if the missing letter might be a vowel, but I didn't want to influence our brains by putting in every single consonant combination; there's a reason people lose on the final round of Wheel of Fortune, even if they've got a lot of the letters. If everyone just goes with the words that immediately come to mind, we should be able to figure out the message quicker than the computer would. Unless, our guy used a computer to come up with his message in the first place," he couldn't help but add, though he looked guilty for doing so.

"Oh, and assuming we see a bunch of colors with uncommon names attached, like cobalt violet deep, those will be from the standard names that computer programmers have agreed upon. You can just substitute purple or blue or red instead of the variations."
Natasha wondered if even an afternoon would be enough time, even with the eight of them looking things over. She hated word jumbles or games like Boggle. English wasn't her first language, after all, and while she could speak it as if a native, including with any type of American, and most common foreign accents, she wasn't as skilled at the written version. That was the real reason she kept a stack of trashy romance novels and men's action adventures at her bedside, to be able to get to a point where her brain wasn't always trying to match the word before her into its proper Russian first, not that she would ever admit that. If Clint wanted to believe she enjoyed those kinds of books (even if she also did), they were also the most likely to use idioms, clichés and the words normal people spoke in day-to-day life, over the literature she supposed he expected her to prefer ever since he'd found out she was dating one of the ADAs.

Norwegian being his native tongue, Thor would undoubtedly be experiencing his own frustrations. Natasha was also concerned over Clint's take on the exercise, since she'd never seen him read for pleasure, only ever for work or continuing education.

Natasha had little doubt the answer would come from one of the others. Bruce and Tony were the computer geeks (who was the better programmer between them remained in contention). Bruce wasn't the only one who had the psychology minor, and Tony, for all that he was a single nuclear weapon short of becoming an evil overlord himself, had a tendency to over think things. So did Bruce. She was betting on Phil.

Two thousand and five hundred odd entries made for a list that spanned pages, even if they were put into columns. Natasha thought the columns would actually hinder her study, because it automatically had her linking words that might have nothing to do with one another.

"Hey, Bruce, can you do away with the columns?" Steve asked before Natasha could. "I don't think that's really helping."

"Sorry," Bruce said automatically, while Tony told him not to make the change. That led to a quick survey to find out who wanted them in what permutation and, in the end, only Bruce, Tony and Thor kept the columns while the rest of them slogged through the extra pages.

Natasha decided to skip to the middle of the document, figuring most everyone would start from the beginning, but one of the others might also think that and go straight to the end. She pulled out a legal pad from her desk with the intent to start picking words and making sentences, scanning for words that would convey a threat first. It was challenging, certainly, and in a way almost fun, but she had little doubt it would become quite tedious, quite soon.

Until it didn't. Because they didn't need to deal with it for hours.

No more than twenty minutes passed before Clint sat back in his chair. Natasha looked up because she was always in tune with her partner. She exchanged a glance with Phil because he was the same. Only it wasn't frustration on Clint's face that they found, wasn't him finding it as laborious as she was expecting, so he wasn't giving up or taking a break. Instead he had an expression of something like awe and possibly disgust. None of the others had yet to notice, though Tony was the next, when Clint got up and stole Jarvis so he could look up something without disturbing his screen.

"Hey – "

"Yeah, that's what I thought I remembered," Clint muttered, deftly ignoring and evading Tony's grabby hands trying to reclaim his property, though Clint hadn't looked up from the tablet. "1874. That's the right date to match up with what else I think I found."
"What have you got, Barton?" Fury spoke for them all.

"I started backward. We had a zee, well a zee and an oh. You can also find park, york and several colors all meaning green in Bruce's code translation. As in green zoo, New York. If you add that to the year 1874, numbers repeated frequently on the list, you could get the Central Park Menagerie Scare."

That got him a set of confused looks.

Clint shrugged. "It was a hoax, perpetrated by one of the newspapers back in the day, but our villain could be looking to make it real by using whichever goddamn super weapon he figured out how to make work to bust the habitats at the Central Park Zoo and let the animals loose on the public."

"That would certainly be a hell of a way to announce his arrival," Steve commented.

"And here Tony Stark was looking for something like *Die, Die, Kill You All*, or *I Buried Paul*," Tony groused. "You know, like a threat or a claim, not a freaking announcement. How do you even know about that, Scooby Do?"

Clint grinned "That there's a zoo in Central Park?"

Tony had a pretty good expression to convey disgust, but then he saw one often enough from others directed his way that he should have been able to replicate his own version.

Clint looked unrepentant, but then it wasn't often one of them got something over on Tony fuck-you-I'm-a-genius Stark.

"Oh, you mean about the hoax?" Clint deigned to continue, though it really wasn't a question. "Yeah, well, I spend a lot of my downtime in Central Park. It's the only good stretch of green without having to drive out of the city for hours. Or go over into New Jersey. I know trivia about Belvedere's Castle and Cleopatra's Needle, too. Did you know that the cherubs around the angel in the center of the Bethesda Fountain represent temperance, purity, health, and peace?"

"Does Tony Stark care?" Tony quipped back, even if he was now showing something like respect when he kept looking at Clint before finally turning to Bruce. "What do we think? Has our Deadeye got it right? Has anyone else come up with something better?"

"The best I had come up with so far was eat green pork," Thor offered. "It got me thinking he might have been threatening the food supply."

"Too many delis in New York; wouldn't have been effective enough," Tony dismissed that suggestion. "What about you, Philistine? Or Captain, my Captain?"

"I wasn't just hung up on looking for threats," Phil started, not above getting in a little dig at Tony's expense when their teammate was being purposely obnoxious. "But I admit, I hadn't been thinking enough about the tech that was stolen and what it might be useful for."

"Just looking at the thefts as a means to get the next character in his code? Yeah, me too," Steve admitted with a nod. "I was just concentrating on seeing any words and lost sight of the big
Neither Bruce nor Fury had anything of worth to add by their expressions. Nor did Natasha, though she couldn't keep the pleased smile off her face that Clint had been the first one to come up with something viable. They'd keep going through the exercise, she knew, because Fury was nothing if not thorough. Suspicious, too, if something came too easy (not that this had come easily given how long it had taken them to get to this point). Not easy, but intuitive, which was a skill that Tony and Bruce too often discounted despite their own occasional leaps of logic, albeit in very select, tech or bio-oriented subject matters.

But the big picture was Clint's thing, Steve's too, most of the time, while Natasha lived in the shadow spaces between the details, Tony and Bruce in their zeroes and ones, and Thor by his heart and willingness to slog through anything to get to the needed end. It was why they were the A-Squad, and why each of their individual partnerships also worked so effectively. Fury and Phil's contributed the skill of having gathered them together, and then made sure they stayed focused. And stayed friends despite their so different backgrounds.

"Even if Barton is right, does your magic code also say when this attack is going to happen?" Fury asked, abandoning any notes he'd been putting on paper.

Bruce shrugged and started to fiddle with his glasses again as he removed them, before looking down at his own pages. "There wasn't another pattern to the dates that I've found so far beyond what we used to get this far, but I can give it another look."

"Is the zoo even open to the public right now?" Steve questioned. "Kids are in school this time of year, not to mention all the snow."

"Easy enough to verify, McQueen," was Tony's contribution.

Natasha wondered when he was going to run out of foolish names to call the rest of them. So far, she'd never heard him repeat one, not even for Steve, who seemed to be his favorite target in this form of alleged wit.

"Tony Stark will bet you it's open on the weekends for the Christmas season even if the rest of the time it isn't," he continued, oblivious to Steve's pained smile. "A Christmas crowd would be the ideal target after all. Plenty of kids, plenty of pathos."

Phil was looking it up even as Tony yapped on.

"It's open ten to four-thirty daily through the winter," he told them. "No schedule yet for the holidays. We also can't discount Thanksgiving as a possible target date, or sometime during the weekend after."
Only twenty-nine days away. Natasha really didn't want to try and stake out something the size of the Central Park zoo for hours and days on end, but they might be running out of time to identify the guy before he made his grand appearance on the villain stage. Assuming Clint was on to something. And that they weren't just jumping to conclusions all around and seeing a conspiracy when it was just a bunch a random weirdness. She was afraid to ask Bruce if he'd tried his computer hex code say, on twenty or so different crimes over in Jersey, in case it might produce the same kind of vague word messages.

"If it's set for a Thanksgiving time frame, we have no more time to waste," Fury said, turning his frown on all of them. "Phil, I don't care how you divide up the work, but we need to make sure there aren't more targets listed in this digital Da Vinci code, or a better one. We need to see if we can predict the date of whatever is going to happen, and I'd be happier if we knew what he was going to use. Not to mention, I might not consider making you all pull doubles over Thanksgiving and Christmas if you get me a name before any of the rest of this bullshit actually matters!"

Fury liked yelling and making speeches almost as much as he did dramatic entrances and exits, but Natasha chose to take this one as a measure of his confidence in them. She could also see there wasn't a one of them that didn't think they weren't on the right track, if not the proper destination, Nick Fury included. While she had her own ambivalence, a fear, mostly, of what might happen if they were spectacularly wrong, she still wasn't thinking about it any more. If they were wrong, they also had nothing else to try. Not to mention, that wrong or not, it had been a hell of a piece of detective work to get them in this rail yard, to overextend the metaphor.

When Natasha turned her eyes back on her partner, he was looking at his watch. She did the same, surprised to see it was only one-thirty. Lunch, anything that was not this… worry, seemed to have happened ages ago.

"I think Nat and I should go take a look around the zoo," Clint suggested to Phil, his tone only a little wheedling. "If we're going to run with this, it might be a good idea to see just what kind of havoc someone really could create down there. It's not like the animals are in cages that someone could just pop the locks on like you see in cartoons."

"That's a good point," Steve agreed. "Most zoo exhibits are all natural habitats and take up a reasonable amount of space, with many of them already open air. You've got the reptile houses and enclosures for the tropical species, but I'm not sure I can see a big enough threat for someone to go to all the bother if a door gets unlocked. On the other hand, I don't think I've been to that zoo since I was a kid, so I don't know either, what might make a credible threat."

"You mean, aside from our guy enacting a plan out over months that's just a little insane, when he could have just opened up with a rifle in Time's Square for his debut, and then turned into another Beltway sniper terrorizing a few states to insure his immortality?" Tony goaded Steve but then shrugged and began pacing when Steve didn't respond, saying:

"Let's review the profile that Philips-Head Screwdriver and Bruciegoosie's built up. We're ninety-nine percent sure our guy is a guy, probably from a good family, who had a lot of opportunities and chances growing up, but somewhere along the way he failed. Not just in living up to outside expectations, but to his own. So he's at least in his mid-thirties now or even older, and is either
working for someone else or has run his own business into the ground. Maybe a frustrated
engineer or inventor, someone who can see what he wants, but has been unsuccessful in making it
work. And all of his set backs are someone else's fault. In short, he's an obsessive megalomaniac
with his eye fixed on his goal to the point where nothing will dissuade him from getting even. Not
failure and certainly not logic or common sense. He'd be another Tony Stark, if Tony Stark was a
loser and a failure, and not totally unique."

Tony stood there for a long beat, looking like he was waiting for the applause yet also as if he was
shocked by the conclusion he'd just uttered. Natasha didn't think she was the only one who saw
the glimmer of fear that appeared in the second before he blinked it away, nor the way his hand
shook for just as short a time before he started typing again on Jarvis. They noticed, yet also
understood that some truths could hit too close to home, so let Thor deal with it. Because partners
ended up loving each other at least a little bit, or the partnership didn't work out. You were never
as transparent as to your partner, who saw you at your worst as well as your best, who also saw
you more than did a lover or spouse. Thor would know how to bring Tony out of his sudden fret
without causing further distress or making it a thing as would Steve's earnestness. Or Bruce's
empathy.

For all that Tony might be an overweening prick with an ego the size of Manhattan, he was also
the first to own up to his flaws to the point of brutal honesty, never lying, even to himself. The
latter made the former bearable, that and the fact that a portion of his ego was actually deserved.
No one else might want him, but the A-Squad wasn't about to give him up, either.

"Yes, fine, go," Phil told Clint after a moment longer trying not to stare after Tony and Thor. Phil
had a fine line pinching between his brows, a sign of a brewing headache.

Seeing that, Natasha considered suggesting that he come with them.

Phil, more than the rest of them, had been working at his desk of late, going out only when Fury
ordered him to go or when Clint managed to convince him. Fury relied on him too much, Natasha
had thought more than once, but she also knew that without someone like Phil to ride herd on
them as well as take on many of Fury's own duties (while Fury contended with One PP), the
department would have fallen apart. Fury had been keeping Phil nearby ever since he'd come back
on duty after his medical leave too, just as fearful as the rest of them had been over Phil's close
call. Just as protective.

Of course, being protective could mean different things.

Steve seemed to be reading her mind. "You should go with them," he suggested to Phil before she
could, going so far as to get up from his desk and move toward Phil's as if lending a little
physicality to his words would get Phil to comply.

Considering not even Fury intimidated Phil, it was patently ridiculous for Steve to think he could,
but Steve's expression was sincere, not sinister, his movement and looming simply his way of
conveying his serious belief that he was right. And that was something none of them were much
good at disregarding.

"He's right," Clint chimed in.

"Bruce and I will cover the rest of the code review," Steve continued. "I don't imagine Tony will
turn down a suggestion that he and Thor head over to the crime lab and do some experimenting
with the mock-ups Tony made of all the tech toys that have been stolen, not when there are things
the two of them can blow up in the name of police work. Until we find something else, there's
nothing really to do here, so no reason for you to just sit around waiting."
With Steve and Clint already ganging up on Phil, it wasn't really fair that Natasha moved over to join them, but then she wasn't known for playing fair,

"He is right, you know," she added, mustering together her own argument. "We all see things differently, as Clint so aptly proved. Before we're through, we'll all end up taking a look at the zoo, putting ourselves in the evil mastermind's shoes to see what clicks. There are still a hell of a lot of variables and I, for one, will be curious to see how each of us would go about achieving our guy's diabolical plan given the factors we have so far. The sooner we figure out what he's planning for his end game, the more time we'll have for coming up with ways to stop him."

And getting outside, even with the cold and the snow, could only be a good thing after spending too many days stuck behind a desk. On the one hand, Natasha was glad there'd been a dearth of complicated crimes being committed over the last couple of weeks, giving them the opportunity to spend so much time on this one case. But on the other, she was feeling her own form of cabin fever and found herself longing for the opportunity to put her foot through some perp's face. Phil had to be feeling even worse, given how long his convalescence had been. He'd gone out from the office only when going to lunch or going home except for the three instances where they'd needed a command presence during a take down.

Phil held up his hands in surrender. Already the tension between his eyes started easing. "Give me five to brief Jasper. And if a call comes in regarding anything in our vicinity, we'll be ending the field trip to take it. No whining, no just five more minutes so you can finish feeding the penguins."

"Aw, dad," Clint responded on cue, which also eased the tension that had lodged between Natasha's shoulders when she'd first started looking at the list of words, colors, and numbers.

Steve grinned at the three of them before moving to confer with Bruce about how they were going to divide up the code work.

Second Squad, this is Dispatch. Be on the lookout for random people wandering around our streets disoriented. While some of these are the typical drunks, stoners and left over zombies who don't realize that the pumpkins rotted weeks ago, there are apparently kids running around pointing their smart phones at others, blasting pedestrians with a sound app that makes you dizzy. Or, in today's words to live by, don't forget that sometimes your knight in shining armor is just a loser wearing a tin foil hat.

"Tony Stark refuses to believe we are back at square one here. That we've just been wasting our time all along," Tony complained as he poured the next round of beers for those of the team who were drinking.

Not for Steve, because he never drank, and Clint had already had the one he allowed for himself whether or not Phil was trying to keep up with Tony (as he was tonight). Steve kept time with club soda, while Clint always switched to water, usually with a splash or wedge of lime instead of lemon. Natasha had had two beers herself already, and was now contemplating between something stronger or something virgin. She certainly understood the urge to just get spectacularly drunk in the face of the truth that Tony didn't want to admit. Just the thought of having to face Fury's temper had her thinking being drunk would be good. Except for the resultant hangover, which would simply be adding to the misery.

"No, you are refusing to believe that someone has been playing you, playing all of us, all along," Steve pointed out, not so helpfully. "I'm not saying our suspect didn't go to all these steps to set up a challenge for us, just that it was bullshit from the beginning. A red herring."
Phil nodded. "A distraction to get us to waste our time and draw our attention from whatever he is really planning. No one would be stupid enough to go to all of the trouble to find a way to disrupt the animal habitats in Central Park, without having actually gone to the zoo for a look to see that even if his plan worked, it wouldn't. There just aren't enough animals to create significant chaos even if they were all released. Certainly not enough that would attack people before they got rounded up or killed for the public's safety, which would be tragic, sure, but worthy of a supervillain's time? Definitely not."

And hadn't that been a surprise to find out, once she, Phil and Clint paid their visit to the zoo. One snow leopard, a couple of polar bears and a couple of pandas? Not much to go on a rampage. It wasn't like the birds or butterflies were a threat, or that the lemurs were going to chase after babies. Sure, the penguins had that deadly fish stench going, but most of the animals there in the quaint, little six-acre zoo were simply wild and uncommon, with even those who might be classified as predators not the type that hunted humans intentionally, and certainly not when all the other easy prey would have existed. Like the lemmings and penguins.

Tony hadn't believed them, of course, had insisted he and Thor pay their own visit and look around, going so far as to use his political connections to get the two of them back access so they might see for themselves that the deadly animals weren't being kept somewhere hidden from the unsuspecting public, ready to pounce if they were just given a chance. Tony seemed to have taken finding that out personally, just as he was now taking personally the wasted effort.

"Why must it be one or the other?" Thor suddenly asked, having drained his mug in one go and now stared at it bemusedly.

"What do you mean?" Natasha asked for all of them.

Thor's return look reminded her that while he might have only lived in the United States for a couple of years, he'd been a trained investigator longer than any of them, even Phil or Fury, with their military and secret lives before joining the NYPD.

"Why do we have to be right or wrong? Why can't we be right and wrong?" he put forth. "Are there not other zoos in the city? Perhaps one that would prove disastrous if their animals were freed?"

Bruce started nodding, his half finished beer forgotten. ")There was that missing cobra last year from the Bronx Zoo. It kept the city on edge for a week and made the national news. What?" he then asked when Tony openly smirked at him. "I followed the Twitter feed. It was amusing."

"And like Bruce said, it kept people as agitated as they were amused while it was unaccounted for," Clint said, angling his glass Bruce's direction in tribute. "It wouldn't take much more than that to create a full blown panic if the attack was against the Bronx Zoo instead of Central Park's."

As usual Phil was the one to be the voice of reason. "That's true, but aren't we just grasping at straws here?" he offered up, pouring the next round for those who'd finished their beer as he abruptly did his own.

Natasha knew that sometimes Phil hated having to be the voice of reason.

"Fury's going to laugh at us, then give us the boot, literally if we're lucky, instead of metaphorically. We've already screwed up this investigation – "

"No, we've drawn reasonable conclusions with the information we've been able to obtain," Steve interrupted, stopping Phil from becoming even more maudlin, at least out loud. "Even Fury bought off on the Central Park Zoo, once we confirmed we didn't have anything better. I do not
believe shifting the target from one zoo to another is us just making a futile gesture to save face. If we're ready to believe the suspect is using the code as a red herring, isn't it just as likely to be as Thor suggests? That we're wrong as well as right? The best lies are based on truths, so why not a code. Or a crime?"

"And what about the rest of it, the costumes and distractions with lights and sound, maybe this new phone app?" Thor put forth. "Police forces in other countries already use sonic frequencies to disrupt crowds. Are there not ones that make people feel more agitated, even to the point of becoming enraged? If it works thusly on humans, wouldn't it also affect animals? Like whistles that get dogs to attack on command?"

"That is more a matter of training than the sound itself, but in essence you're right," Bruce agreed. "There has been research in creating electromagnetic weaponry that can cause moderate to severe disorientation; the same with sounds at different frequencies. And there are always the blipverts."

He paused, here, so the last word was obviously something he expected someone else to recognize. Tony and Phil didn't disappoint him from their quick smiles, but he got nothing from the rest of them.

"I should institute some required viewing, and reading for you all," Bruce muttered before beginning his explanation. "Blipverts are from Max Headroom and it doesn't matter if it was on while some of you were in grade school," he chided the youngest of them. "It was as much a socio-political commentary as science fiction, and made some predictions in its time that are frightening real now." He shook his head and drank a little more, then continued.

"Anyway, we're basically talking about repetitive light patterns that can cause seizures. It might take some experimentation to figure out what is going to be effective on animals, but he's had the time."

"Not just the time, but maybe he has been conducting tests. On pets, humans, and hell, why not on glass too?" Clint asked. "Look at all the petty vandalism in addition to the various harassments. We already know our costumed criminals were getting kids to perform distractions while they performed their thefts, but maybe it was more than that. Maybe it was our mastermind multitasking. Theft, distraction and testing, all by people who wouldn't have any reason to assume it's more than weird random shit when they themselves were also just cutouts and crash test dummies."

"Doing his dirty work and maybe taking the fall, but none of them able to lead us to the guy on top. It's a pretty good set up even if Tony Stark thinks his end game is stupid."

Thor clapped his partner on his shoulder. "I don't think any of us are disagreeing with you on that, Tony. But we can be glad that we once more have a clear purpose to investigate. I do not suppose this Bronx Zoo is open any later in the evenings than the Central Park one was?"

"Not late enough," Tony said as he looked up that information on Jarvis. "The park is also — " He grimaced. "— two hundred and sixty-five acres. We might need to call in the B team to get all of that canvassed."

"Which means we're going to have to be extra convincing when we present this theory to Fury," Phil said with a frown. "Natasha, I think you should be the one who asks."

She raised a brow and looked at Clint, who shrugged and grinned and put his arm around their lieutenant while subtly moving Phil's beer mug out of reach.

"He's right," Clint still agreed despite how drunk Phil might have gotten. "Fury never yells at
"He yells at us plenty," she disagreed.

Clint's grin deepened. "No, he yells – and blames – me, even when it's your fault. But that's okay, someone has to be Fury's favorite and I don't think Steve wanted that job even when it was his."

To which Steve nodded vigorously in agreement.

"Besides, Phil still loves me best, don't you, sir? He's more than enough for me."

"Not something I really needed to know, Clint," Bruce said with one of his slow blinks, obviously a bit in his own cups.

Tony and Thor really were the only ones who could hold their liquor, which was one more reason they didn't go out drinking all that often. Drinking was one thing, a police thing, but becoming a drunk was just a cliché, one that none of them were interested in embracing, not even Tony for all that he pretended. (And not just because Pepper would have his ass and maybe a couple of other body parts, too, as trophies).

"Do you think the zoo would give us access on Thanksgiving?" Steve asked, looking up from where he'd commandeered Jarvis. "It's closed then, but it's not like the animals go anywhere. And the opportunity to check it over when there isn't anyone else around could be…" He broke off suddenly, a furious blush taking over his normal tan. "Right, sorry, you all would have plans for Thanksgiving. Family and stuff."

"I'd be spending time with Pepper, but it's not like we couldn't bring her along," Tony offered. "Happy and Rhody, too. The four of us were just going to heat up some take out and remind each other about the stupid shit we used to do together in college. No other family and no expectations."

"I was going to cook for Phil – and Tash if James wasn't dragging her off somewhere – maybe open up the diner for anyone who didn't have anywhere else to go. But it's not like I posted the hours anywhere," came from Clint. "Exploring an empty zoo sounds like a lot more fun than getting up at the ass crack of dawn to put a few turkeys in the oven."

"Neither Jane nor Darcy have the time this year to travel to be with their families, while I intend to return to mine for the last days of Jul in January," Thor told them. "I do not foresee a great disappointment if our spending a day with friends expands to include all of you."

"Assuming it gets authorized, count me in," Bruce said without hesitation. "General Ross hates me, and the feeling is pretty mutual. Betty will be the first to understand if I say work takes precedent over arguing all day, and she might be willing to lend a hand to escape her father herself. But what about you, Steve? I know you don't have any family either, but don't you normally spend Thanksgiving volunteering at one of the kitchens?"

Steve shrugged, his blush only deepening. "Sometimes it gets to be a little too much, even for me, you know? I already told Captain Fury I wouldn't mind being there on call so someone else who does have a family can go home to them."

"You are such a fucking boy scout," Tony teased him, leaning over to ruffle Steve's hair, then pretty much staying there, leaning against Steve as if the night's liquor had replaced his bones.

Natasha realized she wasn't so much Wendy, but Dorothy. With Clint, her tin woodsman, Steve as
her scarecrow, and Tony always playacting the cowardly lion. She supposed that made Thor her Uncle Henry, Phil her Auntie Em, and Bruce the Wizard, while Fury shifted between Glenda and her evil sister. Of course, that left James in the Toto role, which was accurate at least in how much she loved him and would face up even to a wicked Almira Gulch – or Police Commissioner Booth – if he ever stepped in to try and split them up.

She could live with being Dorothy.

*Second Squad, this is Dispatch… the other Dispatch, while someone gets an extra day off for Black Friday. That means there are only thirty-three days for shoplifting before Christmas is upon us once again. While you're out, remember that most of the public is even crankier than you are today and don't take any chances. That's why One PP gave you tasers.*

"Why the costumes?" Natasha asked, once more wearing one of Tony's superlative comm units which had also been handed out to the rest of them – all seventeen of them. Speaking into the air made her feel like a Feeb, but at least the earbuds didn't have cords hanging down or cutting off her air as a collar wrap. She'd picked up a Bluetooth, one that she'd deactivated, for her other ear so when it looked like she was just standing there talking to herself, the people around her would think her rude, not crazy.

She heard a couple of noises in response, nothing coherent but also nothing indicating comm failure, she thought. Phil confirmed that as he deigned to play straight man and ask. Even though she didn't have a punch line.

"What do mean, why costumes?"

"That whole super hero slash villain shtick," she explained as she casually walked through the House of Reptiles along with Bruce, since everyone else was too much of a pussy to volunteer to take that sector. There were here to prevent the King Cobra from getting out again after all, not to mention the anaconda, tree boas and poison frogs.

Okay, she was scared as shit herself, but wasn't about to admit it. Not when her volunteering for this building likely did more for her reputation as a bad ass than all of her take downs – or beat downs. It wasn't the snakes that bothered her the most, but the idea of the frogs if they got loose, even those that allegedly weren't poisonous from having been bred in captivity. So many of them were tiny things, would be impossible to keep track of, and there were just so damn many of them. It was too easy to imagine what they would feel like crawling all over her skin, like the roaches and rats of her childhood. That would have been another reason to volunteer, because she firmly believed in confronting and overcoming her fears, but in truth she had forgotten that near phobia until she'd already started her exploration.

"Tash is right," Clint, of course, supported her, though even with Tony's remarkable tech, he was a little hard to make out from the raucous goings on around him.

He and Phil had picked the River Gate as their entrance, and should be doing a quick walkthrough of the main bird enclosure on their way toward Tiger Mountain. No one expected the bird enclosures to be viable targets, given this wasn't a Hitchcock movie, but they could prove a good place for minions or henchmen to cower, so they still had to be investigated.

"It seems to be connected, in that we got word of a bunch of weirdoes running around in tights while they committed a few crimes we think our mastermind planned." Clint explained. "But why did they bother with the costumes? Even if our suspect is thinking of himself as a super-villain, he isn't really going to show up in boots and a cape, right? He'd be stopped the minute he set foot out
of his house and taken down to Bellevue for a forty-eight hour psych hold. So what was the point in making the others wear them? More testing? Finding out that he could pay people to make fools of themselves? Reality TV has already proven that."

Phil, no doubt, was giving Clint the stink eye for the reality TV comment. Watching was one of Phil's few secret vices, going so far as to DVR Nanny 911 and Dancing With the Stars. Clint, Natasha knew, watched shows like Mythbusters, Top Shot and Future Weapons without fail, but he refused to classify them as reality shows and, in a way, she supposed he was right. They were more science documentaries or how-tos than the lets-convince-a-group-of-people to let us film them in full embarrassing detail 24/7 that was Jersey Shore. At least Survivor showcased some sorts of skills, even if it was mainly backstabbing and betrayal.

"Wasn't some of the fabric stolen green leather?" Thor asked from where he was dropping Jane and Darcy off to keep a look out in the Children's Zoo. Again, no one expected that area to be targeted, which is one of the reasons they were installing the non detectives – who wouldn't take no for an answer about coming along after they'd also helped case the zoo the day before – there. Thor would be meeting up with Tony at the Gift Shop, in preparation for the two of them to cover the Baboon Reserve.

During the review on Thanksgiving, the squad had determined which of the structures housed the animals likeliest to cause the most terror should they be liberated, then planned their division of sections accordingly. Teams of two in each of the five hotspots, drawing in Jimmy Woo and his partner from Sitwell's squad to take the building housing the nocturnal creatures, while Steve and Fury covered the Administration buildings and the reworked Lion House turned Madagascar habitat at the main entrance of the Fordham Road Gate. They also had about twenty plain-clothed patrol officers who'd volunteered to mingle with the greater crowds on their day off, some having brought their families for the outing, but only those with kids (and spouses) able to watch their loved ones leave them if a call for back up came through.

"Three leather rolls that had started with sixty yards if no one else had cut any off," Steve answered.

He'd made sure they each had a printout of all of the things stolen they were attributing to their mastermind, though Natasha expected that he'd memorized it for himself.

"Have you spotted something?"

"Many festive elves in tunics of green, gold or red leather," Thor told them.

Festive elves, because they couldn't be called Christmas elves as everything now had to be nondenominational. Like the light display and decorations that had been put up between their review of the zoo grounds yesterday and their return today could no longer be called Christmas or even Fairy lights, but only Holiday ones. Thor was not so used to the original Christmas terms that he found the PCness offensive in itself but to Natasha, it smacked too much of the enforced secularism she'd grown up under, instead of representing the open tolerance of all cultures that it was intended to foster.

"They are moving through the children, passing out treats and candies, and I am seeing more green tunics than any of the other colors." Thor continued.

"I'm on it," Fury's gruff voice cut across their comms from where he'd taken up a position in the security offices. "I'll get a list from Administration for how many elves are supposed to be on site today."

"That would be a good way to infiltrate," Natasha mused. "Kinda opening yourself up to ridicule
"There does seem to be an excessive number of decorations around, now that you mention it," Phil pointed out. "Does anyone know if this is the standard arrangement? Some of the presents stacked in corners seem out of place."

"Too much of this is new to this year's pageant to answer that," Tony answered. "The Zoo went green a couple of years ago and has severely scaled back on the lights, but Stane Industries offered to foot the bill for this year when so many people complained. The company promised they had the carbon offsets to run a new winter wonderland. New company, new decorating style."

Natasha could see Bruce frowning from across their room. They were walking separate patrols, but keeping one another in sight where they could.

"That could have been another way to infiltrate," he suggested. "Maybe not a Stane employee, but how many people would question whether all of the decorations that have been put in place were planned? Or stop someone from placing the decorations to check that they were part of the crew? That's also another point as to why today is the most likely go day; a week or even a couple of days from now, someone might figure out the displays are wrong and find something. With Santa making his first appearance, the staff is too busy worrying about the size of the crowd and just having the new program get underway to figure out they've been compromised."

"And a disproportionate number of kids are around to increase the terror and chaos if something happens," Tony agreed. "We need to get a list of what's supposed to be here as much as whom, and maybe get a look inside some of these packages."

"That's going to be hard to do without upsetting some of those kids," Steve argued. "And some parents, if the kids decide to unwrap others themselves because of our example."

Steve was right, but so was Tony. Natasha thought it a risk they should take.

"I should be able to make off with one of the smaller packages without being seen," she volunteered. "If you think it would be worth it?"

"We're not thinking bombs, right?"

It took Natasha a moment to place the voice as belonging to Jane Foster, Thor's girlfriend and Darcy's roommate (when Jane wasn't shacking up with Thor during a mutual weekend off).

"None of the material that was stolen would be very useful in making bombs," Tony assured them. "Okay, some of the electronics might work to make radio-controlled detonators or something, but not the bombs themselves. And wouldn't the zoo folk have been checking for shit like that during the installation? This is still a post 9/11 world, where everything is a target for terrorism if there's more than five people gathering. I'm sure they had sniffing dogs through last night, along with whatever other animals they have undoubtedly trained to smell out explosives."

"Do you even listen to yourself, Tony?" Natasha asked, using Tony instead of Stark since he'd been referring to himself more and more in the first person over the third and something like that deserved positive reinforcement. Still gently mocking too, however, because his paranoia and eye for conspiracies made hers seem like a simple nervous tic instead of an ingrained response due to her past. Everyone knew that only mice and bees were being relied on in some places over or along with dogs for detecting explosives.
"All the time, darling. Why do you –"

"Guys, there are a lot of duplications on the two lists," Steve interrupted before Tony could really get going. "Between the list of what was stolen and what's been installed," he further explained to Clint's interrogative noise. "It's mostly the stuff for the stage's sound system up here in the courtyard. I guess it makes sense, but did we ever figure out what our suspect could do with handfuls of woofers and amplifiers? I know we were concentrating on all the fiddly bits as Tony called them, the diodes and batteries along with the chips, resonators and LEDs, but would there be something useful about the rest to our mastermind? Maybe even those thefts were part of the plan and not just part of the payment to the minions."

"Like he didn't find his heist guys based on who was looking for a new stereo system?" Darcy asked, only partially tongue-in-cheek.

"Does the hot list include signal generators too?" Tony asked of Steve in turn, instead of bothering to stop to check his own copy of the list.

"Negative," from Steve again. "But I'm seeing pitch generators and an autotuner. I guess there's supposed to be singing later on."

"Just before Santa's arrival."

Because Phil always read the prep material.

"There will be RF generators too, or microwave ones, or both," Bruce spoke up. "To pipe the background music along the pathways. I think our evil genius thinks he's figured out a way to shatter the glass in some of the enclosures. That he's been testing frequencies and energy costs as well as different widths and types of glass. He doesn't even have to have gotten it completely right, not if he's able to agitate the animals into doing some of the work for him. If he can only vibrate and weaken the glass or produce a few cracks, a four hundred pound Siberian tiger charging or just pushing against it might bring the panes down without further involvement."

"That would not be good," was Thor's contribution, a somewhat duh, moment, but it wasn't like they weren't all thinking it.

"Wouldn't someone notice?" Clint asked. "You're talking about several effects here, and the only thing nearby the stage is the Monkey House. Not saying they can't kill people, but wouldn't that also be the area they'd be most concerned about because of the planned show? So also the hardest place to sneak in or disguise extra equipment?"

"With the equipment we think is on hand, can the signal be relayed out from the stage to any of the structures further away?"

"An excellent question, Phil, and the answer is yes."

Tony sounded distracted, was probably pulling out his ubiquitous Jarvis pad and checking through calculations or composing formula. That didn't keep him from further talking, however.

"They'd just need some additional relays and amplifiers. Strategically placed woofers. They – he – has probably worked on frequencies either too high or too low for humans to hear easily, something that can be transmitted along with the music. So all we need to do is find extra large speakers where they don't belong, in – What time does the stage show actually start, someone?"

Fury was back with them. "Three-thirty. Which gives you a little over an hour to pin this down, people. How many places can he target with what he has, and how many do we have to remove to render the plan non-operational?"
"What do we have to remove to fuck him up?" Clint put a little more succinctly. Not even Steve called him on his language over a networked comm.

"I'd say if you see wires, just pull them, but we can't be positive he doesn't have explosives too, or at least something to hinder us as a back up plan." Bruce answered this time before Tony could. "So if you see wires, see if you can figure out what they are attached to, but don't touch anything. And take pictures. Does anyone other than Tony or I have bomb making experience?"

"I have bomb disposal experience," Fury said in a tone dry enough to melt the snow still collected in the shadows.

"Ah, sorry, right."

"Why can't we just sabotage the stage show?" Natasha asked. "If that's the origin point, do we need to find the end points? Just nip it at the bud and worry about the clean up afterward."

"We'd have to worry about the PR afterward too," Steve pointed out. "But she could be right, sir. Dealing with bad PR is a damn sight better than dealing with the aftermath of a terrorist attack."

"Stark, get your ass over to the stage and check it out. I am assuming you can tell what belongs with a sound board and what shouldn't? Rogers, while he's doing that, I want you on the crowd who might be paying extra attention to what Stark is looking through. Someone has to be on site to get the ball rolling. Blake, that means you're on your own – Fury never called Thor, Thor, since it had been Donald Blake on the application that had crossed his desk.

– but I'll pull a couple of the patrol guys to stay in your area as back-up. You and everyone else start looking for the relay and booster equipment, and your own suspicious by-standers. I would take it as a personal favor if you try to keep the general public from figuring out what you're doing. If someone does approach you, remember that this is a family venue, Barton, not the fields of the Middle East or the locker room. So watch your fucking language!"

"Do flash mobs enter into the equation anywhere, boss? Maybe ones wearing gold lamé MC Hammer pants?"

"Ms. Lewis?"

"Yeah, sorry. Jane and I have about fifty people and half a dozen boom boxes starting to dance to Can't Touch This right in front of us. There are more of them flowing through the crowds, looking like they're heading off to different portions of the zoo. Maybe two, three hundred of them in all? Some are dressed in silver instead of gold, plus red and green. It's very festive and could be part of the planned entertainment, but…"

"I don't have colors listed here," Steve again, with his lists, "but there were rolls of lamé reported missing, from all three fabric stores."

"Stark?"

"Ask Bruce, I'm busy."

"The boom boxes won't be strong enough without having been drastically altered, but if there are enough of them, and you add in all the damn phones that are going to be taking video, you could definitely make yourself an efficient relay system. The phones would have had to download a prepared app, but these days that's not so farfetched. Especially if the flash mobs are a part of it
since that's how they'll synch up. So they're either going for it now, or this is one last test of something before the big show. We may be out of time. If any of you see negative reactions to the mobs, I'm talking serious ones here, not just humorless people but like over fifty percent of the crowd getting restless or hostile, say something. And, of course, if you see a number of the animals start acting up."

Natasha was really beginning to regret volunteering to take the Reptile House.

"I'm ordering security to prevent any of the Hammer dancers from getting into the enclosures," Fury told them, having their backs as best that he could. "We might not be able to control them along the paths, but we can keep them from going through doors –"

"I've got wires coming out of a set of packages," Phil's voice came over Fury's words. "This set is made to look like it is supposed to light up and is just malfunctioning, but there aren't any bulbs in the light strands. The wires are twisted into a plug at the end and simply hooked into one of the wall sockets. I'm going to unplug it and see what's on the other end of the wires."

Because it was Phil, no one could really tell him not to except for Fury. It was on the tip of Natasha's tongue anyway, and she knew Clint would have said something under most circumstances, except she expected that this time he was right there alongside Phil. She could at least console herself that Phil wouldn't do something he thought would put others at risk, not Clint and certainly not the public around them.

When only a sigh of relief sounded over the comms, no boom (big or little), she let out the breath she'd been holding.

"I've got three speaker boxes and a signal repeater of some kind here," Phil told them after a few more long seconds.

Well, that confirmed there was something here. Even if they were still only guessing at the date or time of the attack.

"And I've got the name of our mastermind," Tony offered up, surprising them all. "The man really does have an ego bigger than mine. His name is Justin Hammer. Former employee, former Vice President, in fact, for Stane Industries in one of their R&D divisions. He was fired nine months ago for incompetence, though the trades simply implied he'd fallen on his sword when one of the projects under him failed spectacularly and cost two good engineers their lives. He's trying to take Stane down by sabotaging Stane's extravaganza and endangering so many people, as well using this opportunity to prove he's smart enough to repurpose the preparations and get around all of the security. Which he just might have done, if he hadn't needed to brag about it."

"So you've found the cuckoo in the soundboard nest?" Steve asked, sounding pleased, proud and just a bit fearful, in case the answer was no.

Tony sighed.

So yes and no.

"Hammer has apparently learned his lessons on needing redundancies. I've found two sets of triggers so far, each completely independent of one another. There are likely more, but I have no way of knowing how many and if he's gone to this much trouble here, I will bet you he has a back-up trigger point set up elsewhere, too. The stage show was easy, was something already going in where he didn't have to use his own equipment. But he has enough equipment to set up something similar. Probably not something big enough to hit multiple enclosures, so someone is going to have to guess which out of all of them that Hammer thinks will give him the maximum
amount of drama he'd find acceptable if the grand scheme doesn't come off. And then you're going to have to find the doomsday device. Don't expect it's there at Tiger Mountain, just because Phil got lucky with a bunch of wires. There will still be relays and repeaters everywhere. Bruce, I'd have you come help me, but you're going to have to disable the back up."

"Hey, I'm downloading a picture of Hammer, the Justin one, not the MC one," Darcy cut in. "Jane and I both think we saw him come through earlier, when we and Thor first got to the Children's Zoo. I'll upload the image onto all your phones if you give me just a second."

"A man like him should fold if we catch him," Phil informed them, offering up his profiling skills this time. "He'll have the need to correct us when we tell him we've figured his plan out. He also isn't the type to put himself in danger. So he has likely kept some of his henchmen on hand to deal with any complications. If he runs true to form, he'll stay on site only so long as to see the dominos of his plan start to fall before he flees the coming damage."

"So I need to put officers on all the gates, checking all the cars and the pedestrians as they exit," Fury concluded. "We might get lucky and spook him if he sees an abundance of uniforms. I imagine he'll try to run even then instead of blending in?"

"It won't do him much good to get caught up in his own grand plan and not survive to be able to lord over us," Clint smart mouthed. And most likely was right.

"And the place we should look for the back-up device, sir?" Steve asked Fury before anyone could call Clint on his not so appropriate contribution.

"Start at the damn Bug Carousel. It's the most centrally located structure with multiple target zones within range. Banner, that will be you. We're shutting it down here, mechanical failure, so you should be able to do some searching without further traumatizing the kids. The rest of you are still on removal detail of the bogus packages, keeping an eye on Stark, and finding Hammer and his out of place thugs."

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Natasha had found two wrapped packages filled with sound equipment before Bruce had been called away; at this point she was no longer thinking one might explode on her given the use Bruce had explained for them. In her haste to find more, she wasn't paying as much attention to the public around her as she should have been. It was a child, however, whose hand had reached out to drag at hers, not Hammer or any of his minions. A little girl.

"Why are you taking the presents, lady? Why?"

Clint started cracking up in her ear, having overheard the damn urchin. "Tell her you're taking it back to workshop, Tash. That you're going to fix it up there, then bring it back here," he barely got out.

She didn't get it, not at first, but when even Steve started sniggering, she put it together. Cindy Lou Who and the Grinch, not the dreadful movie version, but the TV special Clint had insisted not only on watching last night after they'd finished their walk-through at the zoo, but one he had also taped for them to watch again. Despite him also owning it on DVD, just in case he was working a shift when it aired again. That and Rudolph, which no doubt would be on constant play at the diner if he opened up –

"Let the nice lady do her job, Emily," the child's father scolded as he finally showed up to take his
daughter in hand.

Natasha could have kidnapped her and gotten out a door before the dad would have ever noticed his Emily missing, but that wasn't quite the holiday cheer she was supposed to be spreading, she supposed, so she carefully bit back the words begging to come out. She also couldn't shout at all the other kids and parents stopping to stare at her now that their attention had been drawn her way. Someone else had apparently taken exception to her actions and had gathered a zoo worker to get involved, but that actually was a good thing in Natasha's book, not a new problem.

She flashed her badge when she was approached and promptly commandeered the employee plus one more to start gathering up all of the ground based decoration. Heavy-handed, perhaps, since it was looking as if only one in four that were suspicious. Natasha was more concerned about running out of time, however, than the later explanations she might have to give. She did make sure they left all of the ones with wiring for her to remove, and otherwise crossed her fingers.

"I've found something more than speakers and woofers inside the carousel control room," Bruce warned them abruptly.

"What have you got, science bro?" Tony prompted. "I might be done here if you need me to join you?"

"Might isn't good enough, Stark," Fury growled. "Unless... do you need his help, Banner?"

"I'm good, sir. It's complicated, but only because it's so... remarkably jury-rigged. It should be fine. I just need to trace back each part to see what it's connected to before I start pulling it apart."

Natasha began to breathe easier but would be a lot more satisfied if someone found Hammer and confirmed there were only the two trigger points. And that they'd located all of the target areas, if not all the outlets. This was still so much guesswork.

Phil then helped them all breathe a little easier. "Clint and I have cleared scoping out the public viewing areas around Tiger Mountain. We're going to assume the off-exhibit areas were not disturbed; I cannot image a decorating company or even Stane employees would have been given access to the breeding and care areas. Who needs help?"

"Not I," Thor answered. "I am nearly finished myself."

"We're good," came from Woo. "No decorations inside the Nocturnal pavilion, and not too many outside either. We'll be done here in a couple of minutes. I was thinking we could check out the building outside the Gorilla Forest? It wasn't one on our list, but he's been pretty thorough here and even though it's small, if any of the gorillas get out, that would definitely get some coverage. And incite panic."

"Good instincts, Woo. Blake, you join them and clear the Gorillas. Coulson, take Barton and help Natasha finish, then I want you two to keep watch over Banner. Natasha, you join Rogers and Stark when you're all done in the reptile house. If we're right about Hammer's ego and his presence, he's got to be planning to be on site for one or both launches. And by my watch, that's in less than twenty minutes if we're taking the start of the stage show as the trigger. He's not going to be able to get close enough to see the show if he waits too much longer, since seats are already filling up."

What Fury said, they did. Natasha was all for getting some additional help; the House of Reptiles had too many corners just rife for decorating, and Bruce had been called away just as they'd gotten started. She was also in the location closest to the device Bruce was disabling, meaning she would be dealing with the effects first, if the damn thing went off before it could be disarmed. With two
more people to help her clear the building, they had a chance of making the time limit.

Phil, ever the adapt-on-the-fly guy, had pulled four of their off-duty compatriots from their exterior rounds in the area and set them to finish up with the suspect packages removed from the Reptile House. Natasha was definitely feeling the time running away from them and was happy for the chance to stretch her legs a little as she took off at a light jog toward Steve and Tony. Just enough to show she was serious about getting somewhere so people should give way, but not so reckless as to startle or push aside the crowd and start them to panic over nothing. A lot of the crowd was also heading toward Astor Court and the stage show themselves, though enough seemed to feel that with the greater number of people moving to take in the entertainment, they'd have an easier, less crowded time at the exhibits and so stayed put.

"Do people have to have tickets for the stage show?" she threw out in general, having no idea if anyone had bothered to research that.

"They do, and I've got security handling that, in case Hammer decided to make himself part of that crowd," Fury responded.

It was nice to have a boss that could keep an eye on the big picture as well as the little details. Nice, comforting, and rare. Fury certainly wasn't the easiest person to work for, but he was definitely one of the best, and made you want to be your best. Even Tony respected Fury, otherwise he would have been the first of them to leave, since it wasn't like he needed to work.

Tony was definitely in his element though. When she joined Steve, Tony was surrounded by equipment, pieces of equipment, really, along with a couple of disgruntled sound men and one suit that Natasha guessed was either the stage manager slash promoter, or maybe the union rep for the sound guys. The zoo suits all knew the squad was actively working and had given them complete access without having to be watched over.

"The sooner you stop whining about what I've done to your boards, the quicker I will have it put back together," Tony was telling them. "Yelling at me isn't going to make me work any quicker, and if I hear another threat, I'm just going to walk away and leave it all for you."

"Is there a problem here?" Steve asked, stepping up to the suit while also incidentally putting himself between the three men and Tony when the suit looked like he wasn't happy with Tony's answer. Though it wasn't like he or the sound men were big enough to be threatening, certainly not standing there in front of someone like Steve. (Only Thor was bigger out of them, though Fury was just as tall.)

Natasha didn't doubt that Tony could have taken care of himself anyway, regardless of this having the potential to be three against one. But in addition to his sheer presence of size and muscle, Steve exuded calm and trustworthiness, which is why he or Phil took all the press conferences along with Tony when Tony volunteered.

The suit immediately took a deep breath and started making his plea. "We need start the pre-show, officer --"

"Detective," Tony muttered over the board he was piecing back together. Natasha crouched down at his side to offer him another pair of hands if he would use them.

"Sorry… detective. We'll just cross our fingers that the sound levels haven't been destroyed by this…"

"Necessity."
"Necessity, though, – "

Natasha decided the suit hadn't picked up that Tony was feeding him words and he was parroting them. The two sounds guys had, as well as Steve, as all three were fighting back grins. She didn't need to hide hers as the fall of hair that had dropped from her bun did it for her.

"– if we could just play one of the pre-recorded song to make sure it will be bearable?" the suit babbled on. "And we need to bring up the lights – "

"Oh, fuck me." Tony stopped what he was doing. "Bruce, I forgot about the damn light rigs. Do you have one near you?"

"There has to be some sort of control for the carousel overheads. There are quite a few spokes, if you will, but I don't know – "

As Bruce answered, Tony looked back at the sound guys. "Do you have any laser rigs up there?"

"Not here, man, it's Christmas, not Pink Floyd."

"It's fucking Thanksgiving, not Christmas," Tony muttered in return, his complaining interrupted by Clint.

"What do I need to look for?" came from Clint at the same time Bruce said:

"Whoa, you shouldn't stand on top of the mantis – Clint, there's a ladder in here – "

Of course immediately Clint started climbing, first atop one of the rides it sounded like, then no doubt he simply hoisted himself up one of the carousel poles to get into the lattice work overhead. While heights didn't bother Natasha enough to keep her away from edges or certainly from doing her job, she preferred glass enclosures or at least a railing. Not climbing up to a lighting rig that was going to be all narrow beams and catwalks.

"I should go," Steve offered, ignoring the distressed suit in front of him and carefully taking hold of Natasha's arm to stop her without grabbing her.

"You're too heavy," the sound lead argued. He tapped his own headset and started asking for the location of an Archie. In another couple of seconds, he was then pointing off to the right of the stage at another narrow ladder. "Archie will take that side," he told them and handed over his headset to Tony. "Tell him what he should be looking for."

"Nine minutes to show time," the suit fluttered.

"Well, obviously it's going to start a little late," Tony groused as Natasha took off for the near ladder.

Soon she could only hear him through the comm.

"Bruce, Clint, any delay here means the trigger will probably go to failsafe and start there instead. Phil, I've already pulled a slave device from the light board, so look for one in your area. Nat, Clint, Archie, the only things that should be up with the rigging structures are a bunch of cables, counterweights, and the lights themselves.

"Nothing that structured on my end, but I'm assuming the grapefruit diameter tube lashed to one of the beams and pointing at a mirrored disco ball isn't standard equipment?" Clint asked.

"No... yes... maybe? Fury, you need to find out if the disco ball is intentional over at the Bug
"House. Do they use lasers for added effects?"

"It's a carousel, Tony, not a habitat," Phil corrected him. "With a lot of people milling about trying to find out why it's been closed down.

"That's a negative on the disco ball, Barton." came from Fury.

"So grapefruit tube is a negative too, I'm guessing."

"Yeah, go ahead and disable it, Clint," Tony suggested. "If it turns out it was a standard piece of equipment, I'll pay for a replacement.

"And how to I disable a laser?"

"If you can't just pull the plug on it, the first thing you can try is simply moving it out of its current alignment. For a laser to do something useful, it's going to be targeted to penetrate and or burn something or, what it sounds like in this instance, set to reflect off of a disco ball. To actually cause damage, that also means its high powered, not just a laser pointer equivalent, but something that can really blind people after being reflected. So you'll want to put on your sunglasses, just in case, but I still don't recommend looking at the beam if it starts up. Move the tube off the set position but don't point it downward either, where you can blind someone directly. You could try hitting it with something, like the butt of your gun, which might crack one of the lenses. Even throwing a jacket over the end of the tube will slow it down if not render it useless. Unless it's amped up to burn through a jacket, but even then …"

Natasha tuned out the specifics of Tony's informative babble; there wasn't anything like that up here in her area, and after a minute or so, Archie signaled the same. She headed back toward her ladder.

"I don't suppose I should shoot the disco ball as an added precaution?" Clint asked Phil, or Fury, or just in general.

"It's replacement, as well as the therapy bill for the kids that might be traumatized by witnessing it will come out of your paycheck," Phil warned.

"Too mean," Clint started to complain. "You never let – shit! Darce, you said something about a flash mob? It's here, guys. And the fucking carousel is starting up again. Fury, I thought – "

"It was," Fury growled. "The on site operator was radioed to shut it down and post the temporarily closed, check back later sign. No one should – "

"Yeah, well, they are. Lights and music and the flash mob." Clint's voice was rising along with the background noise. "The carousel isn't playing its calliope music. Somehow we've got Hammer time. Which could mean we are at Hammer time."

"I have just sighted the cowardly Justin Hammer exiting the shuttle station near the gift shop," Thor brought them more bad news.

At the same time, Phil said: "Someone is in the ticket booth. Can we determine whose badge gave them access?"

And overlapping from Tony: "Bruce, do you have your sonic weapon or whatever dismantled?"

It was almost too much to sort out, especially when Fury chimed back over Bruce's yes.
"Blake, stay on Hammer's tail. See if you can figure out his destination, and whether he's meeting anyone. He's not with someone now, right?"

"I've got access to the zoo security," Steve then followed. "Phil, the badge belongs to an employee by the name of Vanko. He's worked here for five months."

That name had Natasha stopping in her tracks from where she'd chosen to see if she could intercept Hammer while Thor trailed him. "Ivan Vanko?" She couldn't keep the surprise – or the apprehension from her voice. Which effectively shut everyone else up.

"No, Anton."

Wrong name, but that only made it worse, made it more like to really be Ivan Vanko.

"Talk to me, Natasha?" Fury ordered.

"Ivan Vanko, was State Sec, old school KGB in that he hated America, not one of the debonair, honor between to cold war warriors type. His father was Anton Vanko, a general and hero for Russia during World War II. If it's who I'm thinking of, he'd be in his fifties at least, maybe into his sixties."

"The age is right," both Phil and Steve seemed to agree.

"He's moving out from the ticket booth up onto the carousel," Phil continued. "Clint, can you get eyes on him? He's about six feet, heavy-set, long graying hair and wearing one of the zoo employee jackets."

"I can't see shit," Clint complained. "The laser may be off line, but the disco ball is distracting all on its own, at least from up here."

"Phil, see if you can get close enough to snap a picture of him and send it to Natasha," Fury ordered. "We need to make sure he's who we think he is before we take him down. So far he's simply guilty of having been bribed by the flash mob to give them access to the carousel for their show."

"Do we assume the end of the song is the go point?" Bruce was asking as Natasha warned:

"If it is the right Vanko, he has no problems creating a body count, sir. Hell, he's the type to come to a gun fight wearing a suicide vest."

"Not on my watch. Blake, where is Hammer? Do you have him?"

"He has circled around the Amphibian building and has stopped to engage in conversation with a handful of the elves at the crossroads to go into Astor Court and the stage area, or to go around the front of the Madagascar building. I cannot separate him out of the crowd around him without raising attention and if these are some of his henchmen, I cannot guarantee the civilians nearby might not be put into danger."

"Dammit! Stark, are you done?"

Fury's anger and frustration was palpable.

"Yes. I can – "

"Get up here into the security office and see if you can override the carousel and keep it shut down," Fury cut him off. "And maybe redirect some of the cameras so I can see Vanko. Rogers,
Romanova, move on Blake's position. I'm also sending park security and several of more of our guys. Delta, Four, that's you. Romanova it'll be up to you to cut Hammer from the herd while the rest follow and detain the elves. If they're on the up and up, we can apologize afterward, but if they give you trouble or try to run, take them out, away from the people if possible."

The irony that one of the major reasons Natasha had left Russia and her own position with the reformed State Security Force was so that she no longer had to trade on her body's appeal, (just it's physical skills), and for a chance to use her intelligence for something other than manipulating people (even if she still mainly ferreted out secrets) was not lost on her. Fury's plan was sound, however, going off of the profile they'd compiled for Hammer; not just single but that he thought highly enough of himself that having a strange woman walk up and proposition him shouldn't trigger his paranoia. Especially when she was offering him his excuse to leave the area before the shit when down.

She'd already discarded her jacket when she climbed up into the light rigging. Though she was wearing a sweater underneath and a buttoned top would have made it easier, she had only to remove the belt from her jeans and refasten it over the cashmere, tightening it an extra notch to cinch and accentuate. She'd also been letting her hair grow out since leaving IAB and now she released the full volume of it, finger-combing and fluffing it into an artful, tousled mess.

Tony gave her a wolf whistle as he peeled off right while she and Steve moved left. Steve was more circumspect in not staring at her now well displayed breasts, but Jasper Sitwell nearly swallowed his tongue when he joined up with them. He managed not to embarrass himself further by doing anything more than nodding in acknowledgement that they were now working together, though.

"Dammit, Vanko is bringing up some of the watching children, helping them onto the carousel bugs," Bruce cursed. "If he is here to do anything more than spread Christmas cheer, he's only got to stay with one of them to have a hostage."

"The song is almost over and the flash mob is gearing up to a big finale."

Natasha couldn't think about Clint's warning, about what might be happening to her partner and other friends in just a few seconds. She could see Hammer herself now, gesturing wildly toward the stage as well as down toward the Monkey House or Tiger Mountain. Two of the elves were already moving away purposefully, as if they'd gotten their order. She exchanged the slightest of nods with Thor as he followed, and took her earbud out, knowing that if things went to hell now, she couldn't afford the distraction.

Just catching Hammer's eye and issuing an invitation with her own wasn't going to work. She'd need something more –

Yes, the abandoned cup, filled with water or a well diluted soft drink would work. Scooping it up, she deftly weaved between the crowds to close in on Hammer. The dance and timing came easily, as if she still did the kind of things she'd been raised almost from birth to manage. So did making out what he was saying in a furious whisper:

"– you're gonna make good on our arrangement because if you don't, you're gonna be exactly what you were when I found you: a dead man. You got that?"

A quick stumble into one of the elves backing away from Hammer had Natasha stumbling and practically throwing herself into Hammer's arms. He moved instinctively to fend her off, only to then jerk and almost contort himself reaching for her instead of trying to push her away once he caught of glimpse of who was crashing into him. Angling her own arm so the cup went flying as he 'steadied' her by reeling her in closer was child's play.
The drink was fucking cold. She vowed she'd take the cost of a replacement top and bra out of Hammer's hide.

"My god! Shit! I'm sorry, I'm – "

Hammer had his hands all over Natasha's chest, trying to skim away the liquid while not so incidentally copping a feel. The only saving grace was that this wasn't occurring in summer, when she might have been in a t-shirt or other cotton blouse. Not that there needed to be transparency for her breasts to have gotten further defined. The cup had originally held at least forty-two ounces, and more than half had remained for her to dump on herself.

"What can I – Of course I'll pay for – "

Not even James paid that much attention to her breasts (they just weren't that sensitive). Natasha endured it however, playing her part and giving out a breathless laugh.

"I'm okay," she simpered, making sure she touched Hammer in return. "It's just so cold and… well… wet. And sticky."

Not the most scintillating of dialogue, but it did its job in keeping Hammer's attention on her instead of the fact that she was subtly leading him away from anyone else. She was more or less leading him toward the admin buildings and Fury, though he most likely thought she was moving them to the nearest restrooms. She'd gotten him to turn the corner to the path in front of Madagascar and away from his remaining henchmen before he caught on and put up his first resistance.

"I need to clean up," she said immediately, with a gesture to the closest door. "Then maybe we could…" She trailed off, leaving it an open ended question with her expression offering suggestions Hammer would have to be dead – or gay – to ignore.

Or nervous and on a time schedule, not looking back at his men but at his watch. Plus a few nervous glances off in the direction of the stage though their view was blocked by the building. He didn't seem nervous/frustrated because nothing had happened yet, however, which she counted as a win. At least on this end of the park, his grand scheme did not seem tied to the end of the song, since she was sure it had already finished. There were no screams or panicking crowds rushing their direction yet, either, so …

"Please," she requested, delivering an Oscar-worthy performance when Hammer hesitated. "You promised you'd make it up to me."

"I said I'd pay for a cleaning – for a replacement," he stuttered over himself, reaching into his coat pocket for his wallet.

The correction had to be him not wanting to appear cheap, Natasha suspected. Hammer reminded her of Tony at his worst, right after they'd first met, when he'd thought that his so-called charm and throwing money around would get him anything he wanted.

Natasha shook her head at Hammer and raised her hand to stop the one with the wallet against his chest. "Oh, I'm not interested in your money," she offered, dropping her vocal register and licking her lips with just the right hint of calculation and boldness. She also started moving again, backward and still holding onto Hammer's hand, toward the security offices. "We could worry about my clothes say, in the morning?"

"I… I… ah, what the hell. I've got a palatial shower back at my place. If you don't mind being sticky for a little longer?"
Hook, line and sinker, but then Natasha had been trained in this and had found, over the years, that most men were just this easy. At least in her hands.

She shifted around so she could cuddle up against Hammer's side, clutching his arm this time with both of her hands. Which also gave her full control in leading him closer to the Admin buildings.

"Where are you parked?"

"I came by Metro-North," he answered with a brittle, fake laugh.

Worried about being cheap again, Natasha thought, though she rather thought it had been his precaution in not being identified through a car registration.

"I live up in Mt. Pleasant, in Pocantico Hills near the Rockefeller Estate," he then started bragging. "But we could go to your place if you prefer. Or a hotel?"

"I know the perfect place," she reassured him.

"Sing Sing most likely," Fury announced, coming up from behind them with a handful of security personal as escort. And Tony. "Though it will be Rikers for the night, Mr. Hammer."

"I don't know what you are talking about," Hammer stammered, trying in vain to pull himself free.

Fury's grip was like iron, however, bringing Hammer's arms back and deftly cuffing him as Natasha let go.

"Don't even," Fury warned, his tone sounding almost bored. "We have enough elves, and all the pieces of your so called doomsday devices that it will take all day just to list the charges. I suspect we won't even have to, however," he added with the kind of fearsome glee that made even the people who liked and worked for Fury a little afraid of him. "I suspect that the Feds will just step in, what with you hiring a known foreign terrorist to aid in your dirty work. You'll be lucky if you end up at Gitmo. Vanko gave you up."

Natasha met Fury's gaze with that announcement and he gave her a nod. "Go. They're all okay, although your partner decided leaping from the top of the carousel was necessary. He got to the girl that Vanko started to grab as a hostage, so maybe he was right, but he dislocated his shoulder doing it. He also distracted Vanko and Banner used the opportunity; he charged and pushed Vanko through one of those beetle chariots." He finished with one of his nastier grins, "I imagine the State Department will be very happy to get their hands on Ivan Vanko, once he's out of surgery."

Good morning Second Squad. Get well cards are sitting down here in dispatch for Evans, Sheppard and Williams. Detective Blake – Titus Blake, not Thor, doesn't get one since his coming in with his flu is why the other three fine officers are on sick leave. For those of us who were busy or too frightened to shop on Black Friday, there is still Cyber Monday and more than twenty shopping days left. Remember, nothing quite says I love you, like gifting one of the twenty lingerie clad manikins that were stolen last night from three different locations. Check those HOV lanes on Monday, people.

Of course Tony had a doorman for his building, though only three of the apartments were filled. Fortunately, he also had a private garage for his guests since five of the seven stories were empty, and he'd been gracious enough to give out the code when he'd invited the squad and other friends over to celebrate the end to Justin Hammer's decent into madness and super-villainy.
Natasha recognized Tony's Audi R8 as James picked one of the spots nearby, and his '67 Shelby Cobra despite the fact that most days Tony arrived at the precinct in the passenger seat of his girlfriend's electric Tesla Roadster. (Both cars had photos in picture frames on his desk, along with one of Miss Potts – but not her car). Tony and Thor used Thor's Ford 150 when they had to take a stakeout or went off to crime scenes and or take witness statements. The 150 wasn't there yet, and she assumed he'd gone off to pick up both his lady Jane and Darcy, though maybe not, when she saw that Steve's poor beat-up Harley held two helmets hanging off its handlebars.

Coulson's Crown Vic was also absent, so Thor wasn't the only one still on his way. The Volvo in one of the numbered spaces was most likely Bruce's. She couldn't identify the Jeep, but then she supposed it or the Hummer it could belong to the doorman. Or the caterer (she was quite certain Tony was having dinner delivered).

As she waited for James to come around to open her door, two more vehicles came onto the garage floor, headlights blinding until Natasha turned away. She didn't need to see the Crown Vic to figure out one of the cars belonged to Phil; Clint complaining about the sling Phil was insisting he wear preceded him as he exited the passenger side door.

"Listen to him, you idiot," she called back as James helped her to her feet. "You fuck up your shoulder more, and Fury will put you to pasture. I do not want to be benched because you don't have the sense of a lemming. Nor do I want to have to work with Carter until they clear you."

"Hey!" they heard from Jasper Sitwell, who piled out with most of the rest of his squad including Sharon Carter, from Jimmy Woo's van that had just been parked next to Phil's car.

"Hey, yourself," Natasha told him. "It's nothing personal. Sharon knows that, right?"

"Of course," Sharon responded, automatically, as she hadn't exited quick enough to have heard the conversation.

It wasn't personal, exactly, nor was it that Natasha didn't like Carter. What she did resent was the we-have-to-be-friends-because-we're-both-women guilt Carter projected, like now by taking Natasha's side over her boss without any clue as to why she'd been drawn into it. Natasha preferred to give her friendship, like her respect, to people who deserved on merit, not by rank or gender.

Of course, even if Clint did end up on medical leave, Natasha would more likely be stuck on desk duty than get partnered up with Carter. Her own partner was out on sick leave, was patient zero in the flu that had hit the precinct, but unless he was also being stupid and ignoring his doctor, he shouldn't be out for more than a couple more days – a week at the most. Natasha would need most of that to fill out her paperwork on the Hammer arrest.

By the time all of them had caught up to one another, Thor drove in – with only Jane in his truck – so the group waited, figuring they'd all just head in together. Once they made it into the lobby, the doorman came to meet them and direct them to a private elevator that apparently needed a key to access, and only stopped at the Penthouse; Tony's place.

It turned out it was one of those that didn't let you out into a hallway, but opened directly into Tony's home, which was a surprising mixture of wood and warm colors instead of all chrome and either black or white as Natasha had expected. The floor to ceiling windows were definitely the showpiece of the room, not the paintings Natasha did not doubt were originals. All of that, though, including the sunken conversation pit and a wet bar that ran greater than the length of Natasha's bedroom, took a back seat to the people who were already occupying the room. And the music.

Tony Stark considered himself a metalhead, preferring the older groups of the seventies and
eighties like ACDC or Black Sabbath normally, or certainly that was what Natasha normally had to suffer through when they had cause to ride together. Today, however, his living room echoed with something remarkably lyrical and catchy, with nary a guitar overpowering the keyboard and other orchestration. Something about a freeze ray, which she supposed might explain the red, side-buttoning, full coverage lab coat that hung to just above his ankles, rubber gloves and goggles that Tony was wearing. Somehow, Steve was in on the joke, wearing his own gloves (gauntlet style, black leather motorcycle gloves if she wasn't mistaken, along with a gray, short-sleeve tee he was near to bursting out of that had a picture of a hammer inside a yellow circle.

To Natasha it meant nothing, but James started cracking up upon catching the sight of the two of them, as did Jane and Sitwell.

"I know, perfect, right?" Darcy said from where she was lounging in the middle of the longest of the beige couches in the center of the room, a drink in hand. "Hammer missed the boat not dressing himself and his people like members of the Evil League of Evil instead of in all the bad costumes from The Incredibles."

"This is a movie?" Natasha asked James as they made their entrance and hellos. "Or a cartoon?"

Actually, they're dressed up from Dr. Horrible's Sing-Along Blog, a web-series, which is also the music you're listening too," James answered.

"About a mad genius who had a PhD in horribleness and his arch nemesis, Captain Hammer," Jane further explained.

"It's a good look on you, Stark. Very revealing. You, too, Stevie."

"Thanks, Bucky. What happened to you? Did you decide your tailored Dolce and Gabbana couldn't stand up to Tony's custom designed Armani?" Steve teased back, remarking on James having decided to wear jeans and a long-sleeve t-shirt instead of the suits the rest of the gang had only ever seen him in.

"Hey, no need to get personal here," Tony interrupted them from where he'd moved behind the bar. "I'm pouring. Whatever anyone wants. Dinner is set to be delivered in about half an hour. Pep is giving Nick and the lovely Maria Hill – "

Here he paused with a pointed look of triumph thrown at Natasha, before starting up again, "– the nickel tour. Betty too, so Bruce decided to go with. You can join them –

He paused once more, this time cocking his head before saying, "Jarvis, where is Pepper?"

To which the fucking ceiling replied: "Just outside your personal laboratory, sir. Would you like me to suggest they pause there so others can join the tour?"

"You named your computer pad after your butler?" Natasha had to ask. Both of Tony's gloved hands had been visibly resting on the bar as if in wait to know what bottle to grab first, but she supposed there could be an intercom button recessed into the polished granite.

"Actually, I named my pad after my computer, since it's the portable extension. Jarvis is my much superior version of Siri. I just normally have the voice routine turned off when I'm at work since people can be a little jumpy about hearing disembodied voices."

"You built a working AI?" James asked. "Why are you a cop again?"

Tony grinned. "Because being a genius, billionaire, playboy, philanthropist sometimes just isn't enough. Tony Stark is all about giving back – "
Sitwell groaned. "Oh, please. Do not start with the Tony Stark third person crap again," he complained. "You have been doing so well."

"My house, my rules," Tony said, then paused with a little snap of his head as if in surprise or contemplation. "Heh, Tony Stark's house, Tony Stark's rules."

"Well, does Tony Stark allow people to out on his balcony?" Clint asked from where he'd glued himself to one of the massive windows and its spectacular view. "And I'll have a beer."

"No," Phil contradicted him while Tony just pointed to a nearly hidden set of stairs that must have led down to the exit for the balcony.

"You are not going to be mixing alcohol with your meds," Phil further chided.

"I know that," Clint answered, all smiles. He started down the stairs, taking the sling off as he went. "I didn't take my meds," he called back up to Phil.

"Clinton Francis Barton!"

Everyone was smart enough not to get involved in that argument and to not take their own turn at the window (where the view had most likely just taken a turn for the steamy, given the thunk and quickly muffled laughter that followed after Phil chased and caught up to Clint). Some days you just had to be able to turn off the procedures and rules and just not be cops. Or bosses.

For a moment Natasha just stood there and basked, watching Sitwell and Carter move over to Steve and ask him to explain more about the music and Dr. Horrible, while Woo joined Tony at the bar and began helping with drinks. Fury and Maria Hill came into the room from somewhere, and in the next instant Jane was running over to say hi, leaving Thor and James standing together comparing golf swings, or something else Natasha had no clue about.

They were all friends here, family some of them, and that was something Natasha did not think she would ever find, James aside. She never thought that she could be a part of something like this. Seven months ago, she'd been content in her job, but she had also taken it too seriously – for years. She had let the dishonesty inherent in so many of those she'd investigated bleed over to her relationships with everyone around her, had found it too difficult to trust or make friends, and believed that working alone was for the best.

Now, she was being drawn down to the couches by Darcy, who had decided they needed to rate all of her co-workers' asses, signaling Pepper Potts and Betty Ross to come join them as they also made their appearances, along with Bruce and then Phil and Clint. Who was wearing his sling again, but also what looked suspiciously like a hickey peaking out from the collar of his Henley, along with a very smug grin.

"Скажи мне, кто твой друг, и я скажу тебе, кто ты."

"What did you just say?" Pepper asked from where she'd been sandwiched between Darcy and Betty.

"I bet you it was about Steve's ass," Darcy offered. "I mean, just look at it. Doesn't he just have the best - "

"Sorry to disappoint," Natasha cut her off. "It was an old Russian proverb. Roughly translated, I said Tell me who your friends are and I will tell you who you are."

And for perhaps the first time in her life, Natasha was happy to be that person.
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