In the aftermath of the Battle of New York, four Avengers move into Stark Tower. One goes back to California. Another goes back to Asgard. Natasha is tasked with keeping the team in one piece. In the beginning, her job is a tangle of conflicting personalities, emotional fallout, and distrust.

After a while, it stops being a job.

This story is also a love letter to all the books I read growing up, to Asbury Park, with a little side of She-Hulk. It also addresses what the Avengers were up to during Iron Man 3.
This is an official prequel to 1796 Broadway. Read in either order.

Now complete!

Notes

Thank you to ALL MY BETAS for being absolutely amazing: Rainproof, Greenjudy, Immoral_Crow, HogwartsHoney, QueenBee4Ever, Aleph, Liret, and Lilycobalt!

- Inspired by 1796 Broadway by rainproof, teaberryblue
"With all due respect, Sir, when have I ever let personal inclinations interfere with my work?"

Nick Fury cleared his throat.

"Barton?" he asked pointedly, raising his eyebrow at her. Natasha groaned.

"Barton was a question of recovering one of our best field operatives. Sir. It was at least as much business as it was personal, and it was--don't give me that look--successful. Banner's another story entirely. I'm fully aware that that entire...altercation...was simply a matter of a string of accidents, errors in judgment, and outside influences. What I need is time away from the man, not mediation. There's no personal animosity here."

"And I'm fully aware of your ability to articulate yourself carefully enough that you're never explicitly lying, Agent. Animosity is something you reserve for a very select few. Just sit through the mediation session. Be nice. Answer the questions. How bad can it be?"

"You want me to answer that, Director?"
Old History

The first time Natasha had been alone in a room with Doctor Banner after the incident, as everyone so tactfully liked to call it, she had felt the heat rise on the back of her neck, felt her pulse speed up, real and visceral and setting off a million alarm bells in her head. This is fight or flight, she told herself, meaning to be practical but even the tone of her own voice in her head seemed panicked, as her palms grew warm, as sweat beaded on her brow and her throat went dry.

Everyone was still scattered about, moving in, trying to carve out spaces in those top floors of Stark Tower, even as construction went on around them to accommodate the particular needs of their peculiar team. The forty-first floor, where Natasha’s sleeping quarters were located, also boasted an open-plan office area, with large, flat tables on gliding casters that rolled nearly-silent over the beautiful hardwood floors, bright lighting that mimicked daylight, the most comfortable office chairs she’d ever sat in. She had set up shop there, and while Tony Stark had set up their private network himself, Fury wouldn’t give him the SHIELD clearance necessary to get the members of the Initiative the system access they needed. It had been a point of contention, but Natasha couldn’t blame the Director, after Tony had downloaded their entire network without permission.

Well, and been so overt about it. Natasha, at least, knew better than to let anyone know exactly how much she saw.

It was her job to work out the complexities of syncing the Tower network with the SHIELD network in a way where certain stunningly brilliant idiots couldn’t get any more access than they were intended to have.

Banner had knocked on the-- well, not the door, because there wasn’t exactly a door into the space, but the archway connecting the space to the adjacent library area, and stood there, his brows arched expectantly, his hand still half-raised, as if he wasn’t sure she would acknowledge him.

She had muttered a greeting at him, stumbled into a chair, hid behind her brand new StarkBook, quickly and capably helped him to set up his SHIELD access account and his Avengers Initiative email, and given him a perfunctory half-smile when he asked after her welfare.

"I--I feel like I should thank you," Banner had said, in that quietly nervous manner of his, glancing at the clock on the computer, just past her shoulder, instead of looking her in the eye.

"Thank you?" she had retorted, a sharpness in her tone that surprised even her.

He recoiled, his shoulders tensing visibly. "Would you, would you rather I say sorry?" he said, in a soft voice. "It gets to a point, it--there's only so many times I can apologize for him. Thanking you for treating me like a human being seemed like a better way to go."

It had been enough to let her gain some composure. "I know plenty of human beings who've done worse," she answered, gruffly. She directed her eyes back at the computer monitor.

He was quiet. "So do I, now that you mention it. Are you--you all right? How are you coping with--"

"It was more than a month ago, Doc," Natasha said. "Old history."

"I was going to ask how you were coping with being grounded," he said. "Can't be easy to be
taken off active duty, not for somebody like yourself."

"Well, I was told I let my judgment go when it comes to Barton," Natasha replied. "And then there were legions of bloodthirsty aliens almost leveling a city. Anyway, I'm still consulting when they need a security hack or a codebreaker. It's just fieldwork I've been suspended from. I guess they want to make sure my head's on straight before putting me in any high-intensity situations."

"Well, if you're looking for...I have a podcast you might--"

She laughed. She actually laughed. It was a throaty, ugly laugh, and it took her aback, that she had that in her--and him, too, apparently, by the way he rocked back on his heels.

"Guess not," he said, and he glanced at the door, with the look of someone desperate to escape. She handed him the card with his login credentials and waved him away, telling him he was free to leave without uttering a word.

And she felt the adrenaline seep away, leaving her cold and aching and weak enough that she pulled herself into a ball in her chair, pressed her forehead to her knee.
Does that work for you, Doctor?

Of course she described the interaction to her therapist, described it in cold, analytic specifics, a breakdown of symptoms, described the way the panic affected her judgment, her control, brought out reflexes she'd long ago learned to suppress.

Therapy--even SHIELD-ordered therapy--was supposed to be confidential.

So much for that.

Fury had called her in almost immediately, told her he was asking for a psych evaluation, and some genius somewhere had recommended a mediation session with *him*. Within a few days, she found herself sitting in this other therapist's office full of scratchy upholstered furniture in muted colors that reminded her of various shades of cat puke, the kind of stuff that would have thrown Tony Stark into convulsions worse than the ones he'd had when she had rented a truck and driven to Ikea so that Steve Rogers would stop sleeping on an air mattress on the floor and take his meager belongings out of shoeboxes and duffel bags.

And *he* was there, sitting in a chair on the other side of the coffee table. He'd actually taken care with his clothing, looking slightly less rumpled than usual: his shirt appearing to have come off a hanger instead of the floor of his closet, his customary accumulating scruff neatly shaved, hair combed, proper brown loafers instead of sneakers full of holes.

And he looked so...so earnest, fidgeting with his hands in his usual way, as he chatted amiably with the doctor, a pretty, conservatively-dressed woman who couldn't have been much older than Natasha herself. She grimaced, not paying attention to their words, but watching their exchange:

The way the therapist leaned in, tilting her head slightly with an ear toward Banner.

"Does that work for you, Doctor?" Natasha asked the therapist, her voice cool and controlled enough not to display the strain she felt, the tightness in her chest. "People think you're more attentive, they open up, trust you? Tell you about their problems?"

The woman blinked, cleared her throat, focused on Natasha instead of Banner. "Excuse me?"

"I can't help but be a little resentful," Natasha replied, leaning back languidly in her chair, crossing her arms over her chest, "that my employers would pay someone to use my own skills on me. Poorly, I might add."

The therapist pressed her pink-stained mouth into a tight line, tapped her manicured nails against her clipboard. "I'm merely here to facilitate discussion. I don't have to say anything if you don't want me to, but if you're not going to talk, why don't you sit and listen to what Doctor Banner has to say?"

Natasha grimaced. Her throat had gone dry, too dry to speak. Glaring, she picked up the water bottle sitting on the table and took a long gulp.

"Do you realize how ridiculous this is?" she asked, with calculated vitriol.

Banner cleared his throat. "Doctor, it-it's obvious my teammate isn't comfortable. I only agreed to this because I was under the impression--"

"What impression, Doc?" Natasha asked, leaning back in her chair, arms crossed over her chest, her own pose contrasting the therapist's sharply: closed, cold, uninterested. "The impression that I wanted to sit across a table and have to listen to a man who brutalized me because he *literally has*
no impulse control talk about his feelings?"

"Natash--"

"We are not on a first-name basis anymore, Doc. It's Agent. Widow. Romanova. Romanoff, if you have to anglicize my surname."

"Agent Romanova, would you please let Doctor Banner finish a sentence?"

Natasha took a breath. "He attacked me when he weighed twelve times what I did. He could have crushed me, raped me, killed me. All I could do was run. I didn't know if I could do that fast enough. And you want me to let him finish a sentence."

"She's right," said Banner.

It hadn't been the reaction she'd expected--she'd been trying to play the therapist, not Banner. Still, the result seemed satisfactory. She eyed him carefully, and tried not to betray her surprise.

He just watched her for a moment, eyes unwavering. Finally, he clasped his hands across his knees, nodded to the therapist, and got up from his seat, reaching for the jacket he'd left draped over the back of the chair. "Doctor, I think we're about done here."

He looked back at Natasha, and nodded toward the door. "And I don't think we'll be back. After you, Widow."
The second time Natasha found herself alone with him, she was sitting in the theater.

When the Tower reconstruction began, it had been a process of rebuilding what had been damaged by the Chi'tauri. Somewhere along the way, Tony Stark, remotely, from Malibu, had decided that the floors he'd designated as quarters for the Avengers should be somehow more homey, and he'd begun gutting and restructuring parts of the building that had been perfectly functional.

A factor of these renovations was that Tony Stark apparently had a very eccentric view of 'homey,' likely stemming from the fact that the man had never lived in a normal home. Natasha also considered that the genius-billionaire-whatever-he-was-calling-himself had also nearly died, and seemed to be going through some kind of long-distance crisis.

The end result, in the case of the theater, was that the state of the art stadium seating with embedded speakers had been ripped out, the floor carpeted, and the entire room filled with pillows, cushions, ottomans and overstuffed sofas of varying sizes, colors, and textures.

Natasha was plopped on a velveteen bean bag large enough to serve as a bed, reviewing a video that had been released by one of these weird fringe groups that had been popping up since New York, a group of petty criminals who all dressed like snakes. And eating popcorn, since Stark had also installed a popcorn maker, a slush machine, and a soda fountain. She had jokingly suggested that the team needed a frozen margarita maker, but one had yet to materialize.

The environment still struck her as a little funny every time she sat down to screen the dry SHIELD materials on a giant pink cushion with a little paper bag of buttered popcorn in her hand, but she wasn't going to complain.

The door opened, light flooding the darkened room for a brief moment, before shutting again.

He raised a hand, a little below shoulder level, and sat down, a few feet in front of her, well within her immediate line of sight, but not too close to be intruding on her personal space. Still, she felt a tingle up the back of her neck, felt herself tense, an odd sensation when one was sinking into a bean bag whose very existence contradicted such a stiff posture.

It made her sink another good half-inch.

He barely moved, except to shift in his seat, the way anyone moves after sitting for some time. He didn't glance back at her, didn't act as if he even acknowledged her presence in the room.

The screen went black, and the room was steeped in darkness, the crown of his head, the silhouette of his body disappearing into the shadows.

"Lights," Natasha ordered, and she could feel her voice hitch, too obviously for it to go unobserved.

The lights came on, a soft, golden glow, and he was looking back at her, over his shoulder.

She composed herself in a moment. "What can I do for you, Doc? I somehow don't think you sat through that SHIELD video for the sheer entertainment value."

He waited until she stood, and then pushed himself to his feet. That was when she saw the plain, manila folder in his hand. He stepped over with that uncertain half-lope, half-shuffle that
characterized his movement whenever he was out of his element.

"I'm not technically authorized to give this to you," he said. "Privileged information, you know. But I was inclined toward insubordination in this case."

He held out the folder. She slid her fingers over the smooth cardstock—it was worn, dog-eared in places, water-stained, as if it had seen a lot of travel.

A charge of energy slid up her spine—intrigue, curiosity. Her security clearance was four levels higher than his; if the information was related to SHIELD, the only person who could have made the decision to keep it from her would have had to be the Director himself.

"What is this?" Natasha asked.

"Perfectly honest, Widow? I'd rather leave that to you to decide," said the doctor. He met her gaze only briefly—a tentative flicker—before his eyes cut down to his shoes. "I just...I know you like to understand."

She glanced down at the folder, an embossed seal from Oakwood Correctional Facility in Ohio stamped into the cardstock, the rumpled tab painstakingly repaired with a piece of tape, and lettered in Banner's neat hand with a name: Banner, B. "Well, thanks, Doc," she said, pulling the folder closer, against her stomach, pressing it with both hands to show him that she would take care of whatever he'd entrusted to her. "I'll get it back to you in one piece."
She set the folder aside until after the briefing for the next day's mission--one of those rare days when they needed to call her in to get access to a secure network that had stymied the rest of SHIELD's team--until she'd showered and brushed her teeth, changed into sweatpants and one of Clint's soft old tee shirts--so comfortable she snuck them from his laundry delivery without guilt. Well, with only the tiniest smidge of guilt when Clint noticed her wearing them, days or weeks later, or, if he was being particularly astute, mentioned at breakfast that one of them hadn't returned from the laundry service.

And then she curled up with the folder and a cup of jasmine tea with milk and just a little bit of honey, in bed, as if she were about to read a bedtime story.

She'd imagined something akin to Steve Rogers' file, lists of childhood ailments, perhaps an accident, something that Banner would, misguidedly, believe might endear him to her, make him a more sympathetic creature in her eyes. The thought irritated her so much that she found herself bored even as she opened the cover to the folder.

She'd wondered about the initial at first--Bruce was technically an R, not a B, but she supposed he may have re-labeled it himself with the middle name he preferred. Still, that seemed counter to his profile, to his meticulous nature.

The first black-and-white photocopied page answered that question for her…answered it with a grisly, high-contrast newspaper photo dated a few years before Natasha was born. The bloodstains on the sidewalk, side-by-side with the headshot of the charming-looking man with the salt-and-pepper hair and the narrow, pointed features so different from Bruce's own that what passed for a family resemblance might not have been noticeable without the name in the caption.

Brian Banner.

And there were dozens of articles. Pictures of the murder scene, the exterior of the charming little house with the literal white picket fence, then pictures of Brian and his pretty little family: his lovely, doe-eyed wife and a tiny, slightly overweight boy with a mop of dark, curly hair that was the only feature he shared with his father.

Her first time through the folder, Natasha only looked at the photos. The few words she read, in the first few columns of print, were more than enough to tell her she shouldn't be reading this tangle of documents just before bed.

There were photos of cops and neighbors, searching for the boy, a search that went on for two days after the killing, after Doctor Banner's arrest. Photos of little Bruce when he was found,
squeezed into a crawlspace behind the boiler, his cheeks filthy, his eyes haunted and large, a massive bruise across his jaw.

She suspected the bruises didn't end at the collar of his grubby sweatshirt.

In the next series of photos, the little boy was testifying in court. He wore a nice, new haircut, a suit that didn’t quite fit, a tie. His bruises had faded, but he was thinner, and the haunted expression hadn’t left him. He stood outside the courthouse, flanked by a prim, thin-lipped woman in gloves and a hat, a woman Natasha recognized from the photo Banner kept on his workstation in the lab: his aunt, Susan.

She tapped the photo with a finger, then moved to her laptop, pulling up Banner's SHIELD files. Her gaze moved from the photos of the man to the photos of the child, and back.

She'd always assumed that air of caution, those haunted eyes, the slight stammer, the way Banner kept his head down like a man trudging through a blizzard—that had all developed as a result of being the vessel for that monster. But the signs were so obvious, so...so textbook, she mentally scolded herself for not reading them for what they were.

But none of this was in the SHIELD file.

Seventy-two hours and a successful mission later, Natasha finally read the articles that accompanied the photographs. She didn't bother to shower this time, in spite of the blood smeared down the side of her face (not her own, she’d assured Clint, as he eyed her sharply, with that protective, lopsided squint so many others mistook for a look of suspicion). She opened the folder over her knee as she pulled off her boots, kicked them onto the floor, held the folder in one hand as she peeled off her clothing, left it in a pile on the foot of her bed, and inspected a long bruise forming on her left thigh, carried the folder with her as she moved into the kitchenette along the north wall of her living room, dropped the folder onto the counter as she plopped a dollop of milk, a tablespoon of butter, and a whole egg into a bowl of oatmeal and zapped the whole concoction in the microwave. She ate the cereal so hot it burned to roof of her mouth, four minutes later, standing at the counter with a spoon in one hand and the folder in the other.

The news reports left the worst of it out, and still, the story was brutal...a little boy who grew up cowering from the hand of his brilliant, highly-regarded father, who watched his mother fight to maintain a semblance of sanity...a list of injuries, of hospital visits, of neighbors calling the police, of teachers reporting to the school, all ignored by the authorities until it was too late, until Bruce squeezed himself through an eighteen-by-twenty-four-inch hole in the wall to hide from his father after Brian crushed Rebecca's skull against the pavement in front of their ten-year-old son. The boy was the only witness, asked to testify against his father as the man sat there in the courtroom, staring him down with the cold eyes of a man suffering from a terrible, untreated illness.

The police report, the court transcript, those were worse, as the little boy had vacillated almost violently in his story: panicky, insisting in one breath that his mother's death had been a terrible accident, in the next that he wanted to run away, in the third that he couldn't remember what happened, incapable of giving any good reason for why he'd hidden in a hole, rationing cheese crackers and a juice box that he had packed in a little brown bag for the car trip his family had meant to take, and defecating in a corner in that stiflingly small space for two days.

The paper was legal-sized, browning, brittle, typed with a typewriter in double-spaced Courier—or something like Courier, whatever typewriters really typed in.

And then the decision came; the elder Banner was released, largely on the boy's testimony, the photo of Brian grinning like--well, like a man found innocent of murder, his hand tightly clenched around Bruce's.
The boy wasn't smiling at all, was staring at some distant point that wasn't the camera. She knew that look; she'd seen it in team meetings, across the shared kitchen table, in the heated conversations aboard the helicarrier that they would all have preferred to forget.

She stopped then, sucking in her breath, loading her bowl into the dishwasher, and decided she needed a beer.

It turned out that she needed two beers and a couple shots of vodka.

There were still more articles. Not two months later, an intoxicated Brian Banner, hand so tightly grasped around Bruce's wrist that it left a bruise, announced loudly and publicly to the boy that he'd gotten away with murder once and he'd do it again if the child didn't behave. A concerned bystander sitting on the bus tried to calm the enraged man, and Brian regaled the entire bus full of people with a detailed, bloody, self-indulgent tale of how he'd killed "that cheating whore" by dashing her brain against a sidewalk, and his son was happy about it, too, weren't they better off without the useless bitch?

And then there was another trial. They couldn't bring him back on murder charges, of course, but his reckless and proud confession had been too public and too violent, and after that strange woman he'd never met had come bodily between him and his monstrous father, Bruce now understood that if he told the truth, there would be people who would protect him, his father would be kept far, far away from him.

This time, the boy sat on the stand, bravely daring to stare directly back at his father now and again throughout the proceedings, and recounted in no uncertain terms the horrors he had seen in that house, with what one news reporter called "an eerie calm" and another called "a maturity that belied his years."

His aunt sued for full custody. After the travesty of his first trial, the judge ruled against an insanity plea. Brian Banner was incarcerated at Oakwood, a prison that apparently had a specialized psychiatric facility, the name stamped on the outside of the file.

She went back to Banner's SHIELD file. The only articles she found about his childhood were his birth announcement and a few clippings from his teenage years, detailing the science competitions he'd won--and frequently swept, singlehandedly. There was a profile from his community paper--now sixteen and lanky, messy hair and thick black glasses, button down shirt, sweater and a tie that made him look like the Harry Potter of science nerds, standing in front of his huge collection of trophies, mentioning his full scholarship to college and his perfect SAT scores, sounding like any other gifted teenager.

His father was listed, as she remembered, as deceased.

She tried her own resources next, came up with the same information as his SHIELD file, and, to her amusement, a photo that named him and Tony Stark as finalists in some regional high school science competition. A search for Brian Banner brought up a few academic journal articles, and a report of an accident at a lab facility. It was as if the reality of Banner's childhood only existed within the confines of that sheaf of worn papers.

Natasha didn't fall asleep until six in the morning, her cheek resting against the inside flap of the folder.

Chapter End Notes
Oakwood is a real prison in Lima, Ohio. I have taken some liberties with the setting for the purposes of this story, however and it does not actually reflect the exact identity of this institution.

**Summary:**

Natasha reads Bruce's file and discovers that his past has been wiped from his official files— and from anywhere else she can search. She reads a number of news articles about how Bruce’s mother, Rebecca, was violently murdered by his father, Brian, and how Bruce, as a child, was physically abused and hid for days after the murder before the police found him.

After he was found, Bruce, the only eyewitness to the grisly murder, testified in court, but was incapable of testifying against his father, presumably because Brian threatened him. Brian went free and was given custody of his son, until a few months later, when he admitted in public to killing his wife, and was publicly violent with his son. Bruce was sent to live with his Aunt Susan.
The Life of a Spy

When she woke, shortly after noon, she changed out of her clothes, wiped the blood from her face, tied her hair up in a ponytail and took the folder with her to the gym. She needed to punch something. Hard.

She didn't stop until her muscles were sore and her knuckles ached when she unclenched her fingers. She carried the folder up to the common area kitchen--before fitting the Tower for habitation by four of six Avengers, Tony Stark had installed a massive restaurant-grade kitchen, suitable for catering parties of a hundred or more, which seemed appropriate, given Steve Rogers' appetite. That kitchen was larger than the room she'd slept in as a child with a dozen other little girls, thin mattresses and worn blankets on cold stone floors. The immensity of the kitchen always struck her, especially when it was only one or two of them standing in the huge, open space. She went to the fridge (the largest fridge she'd ever seen in a private residence) and stole Clint's leftover Chipotle burrito.

Then she went to find Banner.

By now, Natasha had more or less determined how to find each of her teammates.

In those days, before Thor had returned to Earth, the rest of the team had been informed that there was, in fact, a way to call him, were he needed, but Natasha was the only one whose clearance level allowed her access to that information--and Clint was the only one whose clearance level allowed him access to the fact that Natasha had a higher clearance level than the rest of the team. So, for all intents and purposes, Thor was the most difficult to find.

Tony Stark was out in California, would occasionally jet in to look at the repairs to the Tower, change all the settings on the DVR and the playlists on the house Spotify account, take everyone out to a wildly expensive dinner or drag them to a fundraiser for some political candidate or the Maria Stark Foundation, complain about how there was no good sushi on the East Coast, offer to fly them all to California, make a disparaging remark when Steve Rogers declined, drop a new piece of StarkTech on the coffee table in the common lounge, tell them all to try it out, and get back on his jet. Natasha had all six of his phone numbers, but he'd set a ringtone for her ("Maneater"), so she'd set her number private, so he'd added a tracer, so she'd started spoofing the numbers of people he actually wanted to talk to, but then he stripped her code, so she'd given up hope of him ever answering a call when he was sober and inclined to talk about work. Not to say that he never answered her calls, it was just that, as a rule, if he did answer, it was because he was cornered at a party by someone he wanted to talk to even less, and answered the phone, "Hey, Sweetcheeks," and told her to pretend he was talking to a girl.

Clint was on a much longer and much more definitive leave than Natasha, after the whole brainwashing bit and the subsequent Deeply Personal Event Clint Would Not Speak Of, even to her, even though she'd slept in his bed for three weeks in the aftermath and picked up after him, made sure he ate and showered and shaved for even longer. In a valiant effort to fill his time, he seemed to have adapted brilliantly to life in New York, constantly flooding Natasha's inbox with invitations to movies, comedy shows, art exhibits, meetups. Which was all well and good, but Natasha had discovered quickly that the life of a spy who has been on the cover of nearly every major international publication was a rather difficult one, even if most of the pictures were blurry and none of them had gotten a particularly clear look at her face. She'd opted to lie low and text back and forth with her old friend as he cajoled her about her absence at the Quidditch World Cup or some Dr. Who marathon. Natasha was glad to see that he wasn't holing up in his room to wallow in guilt, but at the same time, he wasn't easy to locate, not without stalking him on
Steve Rogers was generally a little easier to find. It had only taken Natasha a few days of living with him to realize what a kid he really was—he was technically only a couple of years younger, but there was much he didn't know how to do for himself, whether as a result of his unhappy run-in with an iceberg, his time in the Army, or the fact that his understanding of how things worked was almost a century off. She showed him how to load the dishwasher, how to work the microwave, how to buy a Metrocard, how to reset the wireless router. When she'd realized what a mess his paperwork was, she'd spent seventy-two hours alternately on the phone and dragging him to various municipal buildings, using her, er, powers of persuasion to convince government workers to re-instate his damn Social Security number, to expedite him a passport and a license to ride his motorcycle (cue repeated wincing when Steve realized he'd been riding illegally), to set him up with a bank account and direct deposit, to put him on the SHIELD health insurance plans and file requests with the US and New York State Treasuries for money being held in his name.

Steve, the only one in the house originally from New York, was the one who seemed the most lost there. The first few months in the Tower, he didn't leave unless someone else was with him. He had discovered the fully-stocked restaurant kitchen in the common space, and promptly fell in love. It turned out his mother had taught him how to cook, and though his repertoire was small and limited to immigrant comfort food—boiled potatoes, stew, shepherd's pie—it was all quite good. Natasha had texted Tony, and twenty-four hours later, the kitchen had been fully-stocked with a selection of vintage cookbooks. Natasha could still taste the flavor of the day he'd made an entire meal of things wrapped in other things: brie en croute, beef Wellington, asparagus and prosciutto, baked Alaska. He was surprisingly good at it—surprising until Natasha considered that the man was a trained soldier—careful, methodical, good at following instructions—and a professional artist, and then it didn't surprise her at all.

Finally, Clint had pestered Steve into joining him for a trip to PS 1 followed by History of Old New York pub trivia, and the two of them had brought home two hundred dollars, a blu ray of Gangs of New York and a bottle of Dorothy Parker Gin, and Steve started leaving more often. He kept his activities limited to a small circumference in or close to the Tower—Dunkin Donuts, Grom, Argo Tea, Clarke's Standard (although it was still Goodburger when they'd moved in), the Museum of Art and Design—and only ventured beyond it if Clint or Natasha prodded, hard. She watched him stand on street corners and stare at buildings as if he were looking for something that wasn't there, occasionally stopping to squint at Paley Park on 53rd Street as if he was looking for someone. He wouldn't go in the park, just stare at it from a distance.

He'd managed to work his way a little further into Central Park, bless him, to the pond at the south edge of the park, and one time, she'd found him as far north as the Bethesda Terrace, wandering about, looking lost, in his nondescript grey hooded sweatshirt and sunglasses that had become his personal uniform since the Battle of New York and the media attention that followed. But a fifteen minute walk could generally locate him.

If Bruce was awake, he was almost only ever in three places: Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, that funny wooden gazebo-like building overlooking the pond on the South end of Central Park, or his lab.

Seventy-five percent of his waking time was spent in his lab. Sometimes, some of his sleeping time was spent there, too.

Natasha naturally tried the lab first.

Natasha didn't always mean to sneak up on people. But so many years of practiced stealth meant that sometimes she had to announce her presence before letting someone leap a foot off the ground simply because she'd sidled up next to them.
She didn't particularly feel like taking that risk with Banner.

"JARVIS," Natasha said. Even all these years of knowing Tony Stark hadn't gotten her used to a house you could carry on a conversation with. "Ask Doctor Banner if he minds an interruption."

"Shall I tell him from whom, Agent?" The computer asked.

"Yes, please, do."

She knew the computer was simply sorting out protocols based on some complicated algorithm, but it was somehow eerie to her that a man with so little regard for the rules of social behavior had invented a machine that had such delicate consideration.

The door opened a moment later. Doctor Banner stood there in a rumpled shirt and khakis, his unwashed hair at an odd angle, glasses pushed up on his head.

"Widow."

She held out the folder.

"Someone," she said, keeping her voice controlled as she challenged him to make eye contact, not taking her gaze from his eyes. "Went to a lot of effort to keep the rest of us from knowing about this."

He took the folder from her, carefully, almost reverently. "Sometimes it's easier for people to make difficult decisions if they see things in absolutes."

"See a man as a monster, you mean," she said.

"Isn't that an accurate assessment, Agent?"

"It's only part of the picture, Doc. They sent me to India, to bring you back, and they never told me any of that. Somebody whose weapon is information, that's like giving me a gun without ammo."

"Would you have been able to do your job effectively if you had? You might have had some sympathy for me." Now he met her gaze, pulling his glasses down from his forehead to rest across the bridge of his nose like a shield. "Stark knows a little. If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to keep this between you and me. I just wanted you to know that I've been--"

She nodded. "Say no more," she assured him.

She cut him off so that he wouldn't have to say it, to acknowledge any of what she'd read aloud. So it could stay in that folder, where it was safe and hidden. But she also cut him off because she knew how she wanted him to complete that sentence. As long as he didn't have the chance, she could fix it in her mind as the potential.

_I just wanted you to know that I've been chased by monsters in the dark._
"So sorry," said Doctor Banner, when, after several postponements, the two of them finally found themselves in front of a rather impassive Nick Fury, who wanted a single good reason for why the two of them had walked out of mediation in the first five minutes of an hour-long session. "My heart rate was getting too elevated. I didn't want to endanger anyone."

If there was ever an explanation that couldn't be argued with, Bruce Banner had it.

He glanced at her, briefly, sidelong, as if looking to her for approval. She gave him the minutest of smiles.

"And you, Widow?"

"Doctor Banner needed someone to monitor his vitals."

"Doctor Banner has an electronic--"

"Director, as much as my heart rate monitor can give me accurate numbers, I sometimes second-guess my ability to maintain them. I really do apologize for breaking up the mediation session, but I don't think it's in anyone's best interest for me to return."

"If I may," Natasha suggested, folding her hands in her lap and leaning forward the slightest bit, with the intention of appearing like a supplicant, "I'd like to propose an alternative."

"Did you two plan this?"

"That would require talking to each other. the Doc has no idea what I'm about to say."

Fury looked to Banner.

Banner tapped his fingertips against his knee, and his heel against the floor, arhythmically. His eyes flicked between them. "No idea is right. Honest, I'm a little scared."

Natasha raised an eyebrow, skeptical of the exact nature of his fear.

"I'm technically, with some very specific exceptions, grounded from fieldwork. Most of what I do, I can do from the Tower. the Doc has a pretty huge lab space, a good chunk of a full floor, courtesy Stark's need to overdo everything. Set me up with a desk and a workstation in Banner's lab. We'll see if simply working in the same room won't help us feel more comfortable around each other. And then I don't have to listen to Barton playing the same fucking song on repeat all day."

"Oh." Banner shifted backward in his seat, as if he were trying to get away from the conversation without leaving his chair. "I don't--I'm not used to sharing my space."

Natasha laughed, softly. "Neither am I."
How She Wanted to Begin

And so, the fourth--and fifth, and sixth, and seventh, and twentieth times that Natasha found herself alone with the doctor, she was sitting in his lab, at her SHIELD-issued work computer, decrypting passcodes and hacking security cameras for the SHIELD agents who hadn't been grounded after New York.

Her first day in the lab, they shared a nod when she arrived at eight, and by the looks of things, he was already well-immersed in his work. They didn't exchange words. Natasha was a little grateful--nearly everything Banner had said to her since New York (the shorthand always amused her, since they'd been in New York since New York; the idea of New York as an event rather than a place, a moment in time rather than an ongoing state of being, was appealing in its strangeness) had been awkward, and that was hardly how she wanted to begin.

Natasha fumbled with her computer at first--newly-issued, she spent more of the morning getting her preferences set the way she liked them than she did getting Jasper Sitwell his decryption keys. Getting her files imported from her StarkBook was a fiasco--she silently fumed at the fact that she was expected to use this so-called "user-friendly" OS that reduced one of SHIELD's best hackers to calling IT for what should be the most menial of tasks. The last time she'd been given a new computer, she'd wiped it and installed one of Stark's own operating systems over it; Fury hadn't been too delighted about that, but she was aching to do it again--she hadn't used a SHIELD-issued piece of tech since she'd moved into the Tower. She'd never actually shell out what Stark Industries charged for commercial StarkTech, but if she could get the unadulterated stuff free of charge straight from the source (who still seemed to be trying to make up for being a tremendous lech when she'd worked for him three years ago by throwing gifts at her and avoiding the subject in conversation), she was damn well going to take it.

She was finally, genuinely easing herself into the list of tasks she'd been assigned when a bell went off--a loud ring, like an old rotary telephone. For a moment, she lurched into action--it sounded so much like the fire alarms in the dormitories back in Russia that she acted instantly as if she were being drilled--before recalling that Tony Stark's fire alarm was JARVIS, calmly issuing directions on the location of the fire and the most expedient escape routes.

She watched Banner pick up a plastic kitchen timer from his desk. It was bright red, shaped like a tomato, with a green cap and stem. He twisted it carefully, automatically, with the practiced motions of someone who did this every day.

The alarm stopped. It was only then that he looked over, as if he was only just noticing that the bell had caught her attention.

"Lunchtime," he explained, as he got up from his stool and walked across the room to the laboratory fridge.

Natasha had expected something of the frenetic energy she remembered from her time as Tony Stark's assistant: obsessive focus, late nights, cans of fuel oil mistaken for cans of coffee...seeing a man who set an alarm to remind himself of lunch, who then pulled out a pre-packaged sandwich from a reusable plastic container and poured himself a glass of iced tea from a pitcher he'd clearly brewed himself was almost jarring.

She hadn't thought to bring lunch. She sat back down, focused on her computer screen, worked through Banner's prescribed lunch break (45 minutes, 20 minutes allotted to eating and 25 to reading, followed by another bell) until six (yet a third bell), when she shut down her laptop, slipped off her stool, and left for the common space, where she found Clint already chowing down
on crispy pan-fried noodles right out of the takeout container balanced on his knee.

Mid-noodle-slurp, Clint silently handed her a pair of chopsticks and moved over on the sofa to make room. He nodded to the second beer sitting on the table.

Natasha opened the beer, slid herself beneath his arm, rested her cheek against his chest, took a gulp.

"How bad was it?" Clint asked, when he'd (almost) finished chewing.

"Not terrible," Natasha replied. "Quiet, mostly."

"I got you that weird Jell-o bean salad thing you like."

"Hmph. Not weird."

Hours and beers and noodles and bean jelly later, when they went to bed, Natasha hesitated for a moment before she slipped into Clint's room after him. He tossed her a tee shirt without even complaining that her boobs would stretch it out. She didn't even pretend she was there for him that time.
Two Sandwiches

The next day, when Doctor Banner's lunch bell rang, he took out two sandwiches, and put one down on her desk.

Grilled eggplant, sun-dried tomatoes, olive spread and goat cheese on chewy, soft semolina bread studded with sesame seeds.

She left her desk and sat on the sofa, chewing slowly. The sandwich was too big to finish. When Banner had finished his lunch, she moved back to her desk while he read.
Banner still didn’t speak to her, but they entered into a quiet routine: he would bring lunch and eat at his workstation while she ate on the sofa. She would move back to her desk, he would read his book.

It was always a book. An actual book, one with covers and pages.

Two weeks into the arrangement, Natasha brought her StarkPad, the one Stark had given her the last time he'd flown in, all pre-loaded with that manga Clint had kept telling her to read. She read during the first half of their lunch, then traded with the doctor and ate while he used the sofa.

Doctor Banner's way of working contradicted every stereotype of every lab researcher she'd ever seen...while the man himself was rumpled and worn, he handled every object in his lab with meticulous care and attentiveness. He never misplaced anything. Didn't swear--didn't even show exasperation when he dropped a glass beaker, when he singed his shirt on a burner. He negotiated with himself to work past seven: working late on Tuesday meant he wasn't allowed to work late again until Friday. If he did work past seven, he would stop for dinner, heat something over a lab hot plate, and keep going. He never worked past ten.

All his meals were vegetarian, with dairy limited to cheese. She'd seen him eat meat before, but he clearly didn't seek it out. Lunch was always cold, dinner was usually hot.

Natasha's own hours were more erratic; she'd sometimes be called in in the middle of the night, sometimes be gone for days at a stretch, sometimes be given an assignment at midnight. When she missed lunch, she would find something wrapped on her desk.

Once, when she slept all day after an intense decrypting session and didn't make it downstairs until nine at night, she encountered a perfect, gold-wrapped square of single-origin chocolate so dark it probably wouldn't interact with an electromagnetic force.

Then there was the week when she was more or less nocturnal. On the third day, she found a book on her desk.

She laughed when she saw what it was.

She put it on Banner's keyboard, where she knew he'd see it, with a note. One sentence.

*I fucking hate Camus.*

The next night, there was another book, still slender, this one a paperback.

She was several pages in before she realized that it was a children's book.

She finished *The Wonderful Tale of Henry Sugar And Six More* in one sitting, scrolled through the files on her StarkPad, printed out Miriam Norton's translation of *From Two to Five* and left it on his keyboard.

The next night, there were three books on her desk, with a note.

*Out of town for a few days.*

Ananda.
And she started reading Madeleine L'Engle.

Tony Stark came whirling into town just as her project wrapped up, said something about needing a date for some high-profile event, and while he normally didn't go for brunettes, wait, why was Natasha a brunette now, anyway, Pepper was back in California, and oh, he happened to have a brand new red Chanel cocktail dress in her size, he didn't have any idea where it came from.

She gave him a very bored look.

"Pleeease, Nat?" he asked, standing there with the dress on a hanger in one hand and the most gorgeous gold pumps she'd ever seen in the other. "The people at this thing are going to be boring as fuck, I would skip it if I could, but it's one of my biggest donors, and don't give me that look; I'll make you new--new what-do-you-want?"

"Tony Stark can't find another date?" she asked him. "Really?"

"I don't want another date," Tony replied. "Or even if I did, you're much sexier than Clint and Steve hates me even more than you do and Bruce is visiting his dad in Oh-"

"He's what?" she asked. She felt herself go cold, her spine and shoulders straighten of their own accord, her ears prick up.

"io," finished Tony. "Visiting his dad in Ohio. Shit, I know it says he's dead in the file, but I assumed your security....mmmmm...oops? His dad's in a hospital in--"

"Dayton," Natasha finished. "I know. I didn't know that's where the Doc was."

Suddenly, she didn't want to be home. She held out a hand. "Give me the dress and forty minutes."
The number of children's books Natasha knew, that were available in the United States, and in English, was slim. She pondered this predicament over the next three days, as she read about Meg Murry rescuing her father from a giant, pulsating brain, fighting the Echthroi for the control of her school principal, going deep into the center of human life to save her brilliant little brother—a child who, she noted with an odd twinge, reminded her too much of Tony Stark.

By the time she finished *A Swiftly Tilting Planet* (Ananda was the dog’s name, the repeated mantra, "that joy in existence without which the world would fall apart and collapse," becoming a soft echo), she was reciting along with Charles Wallace: *And the fire with all the strength it hath, And the lightning with its rapid wrath.*

She saw a picture in her mind, little Bruce from the newspaper photographs, reading this book about a tiny, helpless boy, seeing a history of madness and abuse, setting it right, ending the cycle (All these I place between myself and the powers of darkness).

And that was when she realized her pulse was racing.

When he showed up, the morning after she finished the last book, he had dark circles under his eyes, hair unwashed, backpack slung over one shoulder.

When she’d first moved into the lab, she set up her desk to face his, so that she could keep an eye on him, for her own peace of mind. Now she tried not to glance over at him, not to look at his reaction to what was waiting.

She wasn’t exactly a cook. She’d eaten in mess halls for most of her life, if she wasn’t eating tinned rations, and there had never been enough food for her to learn more than how to boil water, how to bake a potato, how to peel carrots or microwave a can of soup, now that she had microwaves and soup. Cooking was something that took too much time, too much delicacy and care.

She bought tomatoes, basil, fresh mozzarella, crusty baguette. Slicing cheese and tomatoes, at least, wasn’t outside her expertise, and if the wedges were too lopsided, they would still taste acceptable. Olive oil, salt, pepper.

She reminded herself that she had to have Clint show her how to make cookies, like he’d promised. The man cooked for shit, but god, he made amazing chocolate chip cookies. Natasha suspected it was because of the potato chips he put in them.

Caprese sandwich went on Banner’s table. In the end, she didn’t leave a children's book. She left *Steppenwolf*, with another note.

*I’ll take The Fucking Stranger, and raise you this.*

She didn’t own any paper books, not anymore. She’d bought this one second-hand at the Strand.

Banner looked exhausted, drained, as if he were somehow reduced by the three days away. He shuffled his feet. He didn’t greet her—he never greeted her, but this time, she couldn’t tell if it was for the usual reasons, or because he was so tired that he failed to register her presence.

He set his bag down slowly, took off his glasses, rubbed at the bridge of his nose, replaced his glasses, looked down at the table.

He glanced over at her, watching until he was certain that she was looking back, held up the note,
and put it back down on top of the book.

He didn't say anything else.

When she packed up for the night, she walked over to his table, stood patiently until he looked up, and waved goodnight.

The next day, there was cold Israeli couscous with dates and pine nuts, and a copy of *The Never-Ending Story*. 
The twenty-sixth time Natasha was alone with Bruce Banner, she walked into the lab just as he hovered over her desk, a book in hand.

He stopped, like a child with his hand in the cookie jar, dropped his hands to his sides.

She stood in the doorway, leaned, crossed her arms over her chest.

He held up his hand, wavered, stepped back, dropped his hand, clasped the book in both hands now, like he couldn't leave it for her if she'd seen him.

"So, what is this, Doc?" Natasha asked, finally breaking the silence. "Are you trying to convince me not to be afraid of you?"

He smiled at that. Actually smiled, as if the question caught him by surprise. "Course not, Widow. I think that kind of fear is healthy. And more than a little deserved, wouldn't you say?"

"Logical, rational, reasonable, yes,". Natasha said. "Funny thing about a second language is you sometimes end up more aware of the impact of definitions than native speakers."

"Not my point," said Banner. "Anyway, the fear is good. Sometimes I worry that folks around here aren’t afraid enough."

"You have any suggestions to fix that short of letting your alter ego out to play, Jekyll?"

"You want to teach me to cast a web, Charlotte? Maybe I'm trying to convince myself not to be afraid of you."

She smiled at that. "Course not, Doc. I think that kind of fear is healthy. And more than a little deserved, wouldn't you say?"

He raised an eyebrow. "You didn't miss a beat. You've read Charlotte's Web."

"Two words," Natasha replied. "Clint Barton. You think he hasn't made that joke a hundred times?"

Banner smiled. "Terrific."

He handed her a battered copy of The Dark is Rising, shaking his head with what she thought was amusement (and she was never wrong) as he walked out.
Good Morning And Good Night

The twenty-seventh time, he said good morning.

And then, later, he said good night.
The thirty-third time that Natasha found herself alone with Bruce Banner, her phone rang. Well, Tony Stark's phone rang. The trouble was, she was stuck using Tony Stark’s phone at the moment.

A week prior, Tony had wandered into the lab, announced that he was a genius, set his phone down, handed Natasha an improved Widow's Bite.

"Nat?" he had asked, blinking at her, as she inspected the new equipment.

"Yeah, Stark?"

"Is your hair brown?"

She raised a hand, coiled a hank of hair around her finger. "It's been brown since a month after New York. We went out. To a party. You commented on it then."

"I liked the red," Tony said.

"So did I, but it's too noticeable," Natasha explained.

Tony had backed away, eyes still on her hair, picked up her phone instead of his, and promptly left for California.

It was a forgivable mistake, really, since they their phones looked identical at first glance: they both had the StarkPhone Mark 8, and Tony had left a box of Iron Man phone cases in the common area, and using one of those had been the easiest way to deter Clint from accidentally picking up her phone in the morning, which had happened more times than she could count. She realized, belatedly, that she should have expected Tony Stark to use a phone case with his own face on it.

But instead of returning her phone, he had been answering it, telling everyone that they had to call his phone, and giving them his number. When she had asked him to mail it back, he said he was pretty sure the US Postal Service had gone out of business, and anyway, it was too much effort to find a box, and he would call her back later, he promised, but DUM-E had gotten tangled in a cable and was very distressed.

She changed the ringtone that signaled she (he?) was calling to "Killer Queen," which would be funny if he ever got his phone back.

She changed his wallpaper to a picture of Steve Rogers wearing a paper Burger King crown, which was funny at the time, but much funnier in hindsight.

This time, her phone (his phone) played "Secret Agent Man."

"Fury, this is Widow," she responded.

"You realize Stark is using a voice modulator and pretending to be a phone sex operator?"

"Only because he knew it was you, Director," said Natasha.

"When are you getting your phone back?"
"Probably never. What do you need?"

"I need you to get your phone back. You're back on active duty, contingent on some minor points of order."

She smiled softly. "I'm on it, Sir." She texted Stark and asked him if she could leak the prototype OS on his phone to Gizmodo. That would get his attention. "What about Barton?"

"Not Barton," said Fury. "He's not ready."

She knew he was right. Still, Clint would be a little despondent at the news. "Right. You have an assignment for me?"

"For the two of you."

"Two? You just said Barton's not…"

She stopped cold. She looked over at the doctor. He was sitting there with a pleasant, if forced, smile on his face, looking for all the world as if he must have screwed up the courage to congratulate her on being off to work--and then he saw the look on her face, and the realization hit him at the same time.

He shook his head hastily at her. He raised both hands, waving them in a cross-pattern in the air above his desk.

"No," she said firmly. She could see him mouthing it. No, no, no, no, no, even as she echoed it into the telephone.

"Then I'm afraid you're back on paperwork detail."

"Fine," Natasha said. "Paperwork it is."

That evening, when Banner's alarm rang to alert him that it was time to either leave or eat dinner, he turned off the timer, got up from his seat, and walked closer to her desk.

Not too close.

In fact, not very close at all. Not close enough to make conversation particularly comfortable.

"Thanks," said Banner.

"You know that's not the end of it," Natasha said. "That's how it's going to go. All or nothing."

"I suspected as much. Still. You took my side."

"Our side," Natasha answered. "It's a game. The question is, how do you want to play? Do we capitulate and make our next move, or are we shoring up for the long siege?"

Banner frowned. "He can't keep you out of the field just to get me in," he replied. He scratched at his face, ambled over toward the sofa.

"Do you want to call his bluff?"

Natasha stood up, followed him to the sofa, stood facing him. He actually looked up at her, not at his hands, not at his shoes.
"How often does he bluff?"

"All the time," Natasha replied. "Except when he doesn't."

Banner frowned. "Let me think about it."

He left the room, she looked down at her desk, saw the text message illuminated on the phone.

‘Leak away. Couldn’t ask for better PR.’
Three in the morning and six hours into tapping into some secure network out in the middle of a cornfield in Iowa, Natasha decided she desperately needed caffeine. Fumbling around the small kitchen area in the lab (microwave, refrigerator, sink, countertop), she realized with some consternation that there was no coffee to be had: only caffeine-free tea.

She could see the lights on, could hear the sizzle of something in a skillet, smelled butter and bacon and eggs, and stopped in the doorway, watching. “Little early for breakfast, isn’t it, Steve?” she asked.

Steve kept his eyes on his frying pan, but raised a hand to acknowledge her. “Can’t sleep,” he replied.

“I don’t think anyone in this tower can sleep, if it makes you feel any better.”

“No, but bacon and eggs might,” Steve answered. “Want to join me?”

“For a little while,” she answered. She found the coffee, set it to brew. “What’s keeping you up?” she asked.

“Do you know what Stark’s doing?” Steve asked, as he cracked two more eggs into the pan. “How d’you like your eggs?”

“Over easy. What do you mean, what Stark’s doing?” Natasha asked. “I’ve never known that man to do just one thing at a time.”

“He’s building suits,” Steve said quietly. He poked at the bacon with his spatula. “Bacon’s always so tricky. You need to take it out just before it crisps, or it burns. He’s building an entire arsenal of suits. Sometimes he sends me photos of them, really late at night. I think he’s drunk, because his messages don’t really make sense, and I was pretty sure he didn’t like me. But then he sends me photos of suits.”

“You think he’s a threat?” Natasha asked, cautious.

“No,” said Steve. “I think he’s scared.”

“There was an alien invasion,” Natasha pointed out. She used the bacon to slice open the yolk of the egg, let it pour over the white in thickening, yellow rivulets, dipped the bacon in again until it was coated, and popped it in her mouth, salty and savory and sticky. “Stark nearly died disposing of that warhead. I can understand why he’s scared.”

“SHIELD was using the Tesseract to build weapons,” Steve said. He took two eggs off, put them on a plate with a few strips of bacon. “You have these; I’ll take the next ones,” he said, passing them over. “I know. I saw them. That’s what...that’s what I was trying to stop, when I took that plane down.”

“I know,” Natasha replied.

“So I think,” Steve said slowly. He stopped, looked at her, a divot in his brow, as if he were trying to decide what to say next. “I think if I were Stark, I might be building suits that could protect me from us.”

“You sure?” Natasha asked, mid-bite, as Steve flipped his own eggs onto a plate.
“He’s got a suit called the Hulkbuster,” Steve answered. “Look-- don’t--”

“I won’t say anything to anyone,” Natasha replied. “Not unless it’s an issue of safety.”

“I told Fury I wouldn’t work until the schematics from Phase Two are destroyed.”

Natasha stopped, blinked, and then, unexpectedly, found herself smiling at him. “I thought you were benched like the rest of us,” she said. “Barton’s begging to get back in the field, and you’re--”

“Things like that shouldn’t exist,” said Steve. “I have leverage.”

Natasha sighed. “You know they won’t really destroy them, whatever you say. Not really, not completely.”

Steve winced. “I know. But I’m hoping the last copy will end up frozen in ice somewhere.”
Dear Captain Rogers

Natasha was getting sick of hearing "Secret Agent Man."

"Widow. Look, if you're going to--"

"Did you put him up to this?" asked Fury.

"If I knew which 'he' or 'this' you were talking about, I might be able to answer that question, Director. But generally I let people make their own decisions."

"Dear Captain Rogers," Nick Fury read, over the phone. "It is with only the deepest respect for you that I would like to tender my resignation from the Avengers Initiative. As you know, prior to joining your team, I was personally very heavily invested in important medical work in one of the neediest parts of the world, and I feel that, on the whole, my presence there can do a great deal more good than it can here. Please pass on my regards to the rest of the team. I expect to depart within two weeks."

"Oh," said Natasha. "He's better at this than I expected. Do you remember the first time I tried to resign?"

"This is actually the third time he's tried to resign," said Fury.

Natasha whistled into the phone. "Yes, but the other two were probably less tactical."
Thirty-four. Banner was back on the sofa, prodding at his sesame noodles with a single chopstick as if they'd mortally offended him. It was interesting, watching him in whatever state this was supposed to be...his attack on the noodles was calculated, meticulous, slow, his glare one more of contempt than the kind of ire she was used to from Clint, the frustration she knew from Stark. Every movement was controlled; his punishment of his dinner was as directed as his labwork.

"I don't get it," said Banner. "All Tony Stark had to do to be undesirable was get drunk and put on a robot suit."

"Stark was undesirable because it was the best way to get him on the team," Natasha answered. She stood up, laid her computer on her desk, meandered over toward the man, over the smooth, reflective, glacier-blue Leed-certified flooring that Tony Stark had spent a small fortune on. "Back on target, Doc. What do you want to do? Yes or no?"

Banner took off his glasses, polished them on his sleeve. "Can you sit down?" he asked. "It's kind of...of intimidating, having you...you...stalk around the room like that."

She sat down, cross-legged, on the floor, leaned back, rested her palms against the cold surface. Her palms pricked. "Go ahead, Doc. I'm sitting."

He was quiet. He glanced up and away, at a corner, his eyes focusing on the glimmering red EXIT sign.

"They're not going to let me go, are they?" he asked.

"They can't actually keep you here," she said. "But face it, Doc. You're a prized possession, and let's not pretend SHIELD's the only ones out there who are thinking that."

"I've heard that one before. I've heard them all before. I know, I know, they're the good guys. I don't want to hear a rationalization. Just a yes or a no."

"Let's put it this way," replied Natasha. "I've calculated that if I ever decide to leave SHIELD, I have about seven hours to go to ground. Nine if Barton comes with me. Four if I have to get someone else out. Say, you, for example."

He put his noodles down on the armrest, focused on her for a moment, looked away again. "You knew this when you came to India," he said quietly.

She shrugged. "Like you said, Doc. You always knew they wanted to put you in a cage."

"I think I underestimated the size of the cage."

"And I wasn't entirely against putting you in a cage, because no one ever showed me the contents of that folder."

He was quiet for a long moment. He picked his noodles back up, poked at them. "At the time, I was glad you didn't know I was afraid you'd use it all against me."

She got up from the floor, sat down on the sofa, on the opposite end of the sofa. "I would have. I still will, if I have to."

He turned to look at her, twirling noodles around the end of his chopstick. "That's not a threat," he
observed.

"No. Just the truth."

"This doesn't make it easier to make my mind up, you know." He frowned at the noodle on the end of his chopstick, and finally, slowly, put it into his mouth. "I still need to think about it."

"I know."
"I've decided," Clint told Natasha, waving the end of his Salty Pimp at her menacingly as they departed Big Gay Ice Cream, "that if Fury won't fucking let me work, I'm going to just eat ice cream until I become the world's fattest man."

Clint always managed to break the bottom of his ice cream cone, and when he tried to get it out of the plastic holder, he'd wind up with a stream of soft serve down the front of his shirt.

"What kind of deal did he try to strike with you?" Natasha asked.

Clint paused in the process of sucking the ice cream off his shirt. "I don't want to talk about it, Nat."

"So it has to do with what happened on the helicarrier?" she asked.

"That's talking about it. I take it this means he tried to strike a deal with you? Is that why you're reading--what is it now?"

Clint stopped, and leaned over her shoulder, squinting at the cover of the book she was holding in her free hand.

"The Westing Game? Why does he have you reading fucking kids' books?"

"The kids' books are courtesy the Doc," Natasha answered, and she held the book up, as if it illustrated her point better. "This one's about a will and a mystery and a young woman who's afraid to tell her family she's a lesbian, so she mutilates her face."

"Sounds cheery," Clint said, and he recommenced shirt-sucking, completely untroubled by the fact that they were on a crowded city street and half his torso was showing.

"It is, actually. You'd like it." She shrugged. "Anyway, that's the deal."

"The what?"

"Fury's deal," Natasha replied. "I get to go back to work if Banner agrees to come with me."

Clint stopped so suddenly, he tripped over a crack in the sidewalk and spilled more ice cream down his shirt.

"Fuck."

"I think it's going to be alright, actually."

"Nat." Clint circled her, looked into her eyes, swapped his cone to the other hand, and, with slightly sticky, chocolate-smudged fingers, tilted her chin up. "You tell me if it's not."

She gave him a very pointed look. "Clint."

"Shit, Nat. Tell me these things. Now I feel bad I didn't treat."
What Kind of Trouble

Forty. They sat down to lunch at the same time, Banner occupying the left side of the sofa, and Natasha the right, her feet folded under her and her bowl of mushroom soup balanced in her lap.

The sofa was becoming an island, a sort of meeting point, in the middle of the lab. It was, appropriately, centrally-located, facing a wall inset with floor-to-ceiling bookshelves and a vast projection screen. Staring ahead, at Banner's constantly-looping slideshow of ocean photography, Natasha considered that it was almost homey enough to make her feel like she wasn't in a laboratory.

"Are you getting stir crazy yet?" he asked. "I know I'd be going nuts, if I were you. Except I'm not allowed to go nuts, so..."

"I don't go nuts," Natasha replied, and she picked up her bowl, bringing it to her mouth and drinking directly from the lip. "I'd like to be working."

"And I'm preventing you."

"Fury's preventing me. The decision is in your hands, but not the control."

"Oh?" Banner laughed, a quiet, sort of incredulous laugh that hitched at the end, as if to say that circumstances weren't funny enough for a real laugh.

"You and I both already know you'll capitulate. You just want to choose the right time, feel like it's on your own terms. We teamed up against Fury. This is...well, his revenge, of sorts."

"Forcing us onto the same team? Isn't that counterintuitive?"

"We chose to be on the same team," Natasha answered. "We could have been at cross-purposes. Chosen tension instead of cohesion. Or, well, you could have. He knows me well enough to know what I'll do."

Banner coughed into his hand. "Should I be flattered that anybody thought I might be that much trouble?"

She shook her head. "I already know exactly what kind of trouble you are."
A Kissing Movie

She finished reading *The Princess Bride* that night, which seemed like an ironic exchange for *The Art of War*, and decided she'd better finally watch the movie.

Fortunately, she realized, she was probably living with the only other person in the United States over the age of seven who hadn't seen it.

She dialed his number.

"Stark?"

"No, it's me. Stark still hasn't returned my phone."

"Oh. Hi, Widow. Would you change that awful ringtone he has for me?"

Natasha snorted. "Sorry, Steve. 'America, Fuck Yeah' is the only one I still laugh at. You can call me Natasha, you know. Look, do you wanna watch *The Princess Bride*? I've got ice cream."

"*The Princess* what?" Steve sounded skeptical. "Sounds like a kissing movie."

Natasha smacked her phone into her forehead. "It's got pirates. And fencing. Speak now, or I'm coming next door in five."

Steve had the suite between hers and Clint's. It had taken Steve months to realize that even though Natasha and Clint slept in the same bed half the time, they weren't *sleeping together* in the colloquial sense.

He'd wondered aloud at breakfast one morning as to why they'd chosen to leave an open suite between theirs.

"Because eventually, Nat's going to start fucking somebody, and I don't want to have to listen to it," Clint explained.

"Stark soundproofed this entire place, Barton," Natasha answered.

"Yes, and I exactly how little use soundproofing's going to be," Clint retorted, and he tossed her a strawberry frosted Pop Tart fresh from the toaster.

She whirled in a semicircle and caught it in her teeth, and that's how Steve Rogers had learned about their very, very singular relationship status.

Now, Steve seemed insurmountably uncomfortable with her curling up beside him on his miserable, lumpy grey excuse for a sofa. His eyes kept flicking at her, his shoulders kept twitching, in a way that made her pity the next girl he dated (although the way he occasionally eyed Clint's shoulders made her suspect that it might not be a girl, no matter what his persona suggested).

She opened the ice cream, got two spoons from Steve's miserably bare kitchen, wriggled her way under his arm, and positioned the container in her lap in such a way that even if the movie hadn't been incredibly charming, watching Steve Rogers attempt to negotiate the acquisition of said ice cream would be entertaining enough.

At least Tony Stark had insisted on buying Steve a decent flatscreen TV, although he'd had to do
it by telling Steve it was an old one he was replacing and didn't need anymore. She hoped no one had told Tony that Steve had it propped up on a stack of plastic milk crates.

It took up to the bit with the shrieking eels for Steve to get invested enough in the movie that he seemed to forget his arm around her. Natasha was amused by the fact that that was about as long as it took the grandson in the movie to get invested in the story, too. She snuggled in closer, and by the end of the movie, they were fencing with their spoons and both ended up with streaks of ice cream on their cheeks where Inigo Montoya's scars were located.

Natasha was starting to like Steve, when she could get him to come out of his shell. She did, sometimes, wonder at the way he seemed to swing like a pendulum, between cool command of any room he entered and something like a helpless baby bird.
"Cute book," Natasha said to Banner, as she dropped *The Princess Bride* on his desk the next morning, along with a copy of *Image, Music, Text*. "Cute movie, too."

Against the Wall

By forty-five, they had stopped talking about Fury's deal. The lunch ritual had transformed since that phone call: they would eat together on the sofa, in silence, and then take out their books, and read, again in silence. Natasha ate faster than Banner; he would examine his food thoughtfully, taste every bite as if he were trying to parse out what seasonings had contributed what flavors, even though it was all food he'd made himself. Natasha wolfed her food down as if someone might take it from her at any moment.

Natasha had been out of the field for four months.

She was starting to itch, literally itch, a tingle in her palms, in the arches of her feet, spiking up into her forearms, into her ankles. She was doing more and more to compensate for it: getting up early, meeting Steve on his morning jogs, putting the equipment in the gym through absolutely punishing paces, dismantling portions of Stark's security system for fun.

She'd moved on to dismantling the security system at the Chase Bank across the street; it was too easy. She put it back in place, apologetically told the bank teller that there had been a malfunction with the ATM and it had spit five thousand dollars out at her, and left before they could ask her for identification. After that, she stuck to the Tower, studying the blueprints of the building for access points, sneaking into Tony Stark's private server farm to see how he had everything wired.

Her StarkPad had been beeping at her, insistent, all through lunch, and she'd finally tapped it to silent so the two of them could enjoy the complete lack of conversation that accompanied their shared meals.

When she finished her lunch (cold brown rice, spinach, carrots, spiced tofu in a cornmeal wrap with a spicy peanut dressing), she shrugged apologetically at Banner as she picked the StarkPad back up.

She glowered at her email, at the long chain of messages that had come through in such a brief window of time, and was about to reply all and point out that she was on leave and shouldn't be included on the email chain before she saw that Fury himself had sent the first message. And included her on it.

One word in the entire thread of correspondence jumped out at her, one word that told her exactly why she'd been included in that conversation.

Four letters.

Beginning with "H."

She grimaced and summarily deleted the entire thread.

She only realized that she was still glaring at the blank screen when Banner interrupted.

"I take it that wasn't good news, then?"

She glanced over at him. "Nothing you need to worry about, Doc," she replied.

"That's the tone of voice that means I probably do need to worry, isn't it?" He asked.

"Just leave it to me, Doc," Natasha said.
He cleared his throat. "I-I'm not the expert at reading people, here," he said. "But I think I'm getting passably good at, ah, reading one person."

She shut the screen of her StarkPad off, put it on the floor at her feet. "Doc?" she asked.

"Hmm?"

"Do you trust me?"

He drew in a breath. He didn't release it for a long moment. "Is that a trick question?" he asked, his tone too quiet and not even enough for it to be intended as deadpan.

"Not entirely," said Natasha.

He was silent for too long.

She unfolded from the sofa, got to her feet. "Come with me."

The way Banner peered around the gym facilities made Natasha suspect that he hadn't been in here since the day they'd first been given a tour of the top floors of the building. He stared at the rows of shiny machines, the television screens along one wall (now dark), the grey carpeting, the red and blue wrestling mats, the soft, recessed lighting.

"You should stop by here now and then, you know," she told him. "A little exercise never hurt anybody."

"Right, and what am I going to do?" Banner asked. "Sweat on the stationary bikes while the rest of you are displaying your superhuman prowess?"

She snorted. "The only superhuman here is Steve," she pointed out. "And the machines confuse him."

"That technology's not too hard to figure out," Banner said, frowning, his fingers idly flicking a switch on an elliptical trainer.

"It's not the tech," Natasha replied. "It's why anyone would put that much effort into not going anywhere."

"So what did you have in mind, Widow?" Banner asked. "You want to know how many people have put me on a treadmill to see if they can get my heart rate up?"

"Nothing that simple," she replied. "Stand against that wall."

She pointed to a wide expanse of grey acoustic padding, with no obstructions for several feet in either direction.

"Right," Banner said. He glanced around a bit, as if he was expecting something to jump out at him, and then shuffled himself over to the spot Natasha had pointed out. "Look, Widow, I should probably discourage you if you have some idea about surprising m--"

She let a knife go. The blade ripped into the layers of fabric and foam that covered the wall, just inches from his head.

He jerked upright, went a little pale. "Widow, you don't want to--"

She felt her own heart rate pick up, jump, thump, hard and erratic. The hair on her forearms, on her neck, stood on end, a cold tingle ran down her spine.
She swallowed. "Trust me," she said, her tone crisp, matter of fact: it was an instruction, not a plea, not a demand. She let another blade loose.

The knife pierced the padding on the other side of his head, closer this time.

He sucked in his breath sharply, audibly, pressed his palms up against the wall. Tension was visible along his shoulders, down his arms, in his knees.

"Widow, I can't make any promises, if you miss--"

"You can do it. Trust me."

She threw again; the knife landed closer, still.

The monitor on his wrist beeped. He leaned forward, away from the wall. "All right, Widow, game's--"

"Natasha," she answered. "Call me Natasha. You can do it. Stand still."

He sucked in a breath, and let it go, slowly. "Give me five seconds," he replied.

She counted down from four.

When all her knives were embedded in the wall, she stepped up to him, tugged the first blade out of the padding.

He stepped forward, turned, pressed his fingers to the wide gouge in the fabric.

He took off his glasses, rubbed them against his sleeve. "Wha-What. Was th-that?"

She stepped back from him, walking backward, keeping her eyes on him as she hoisted herself up to sit on the broad handlebars of one of the much-neglected but very expensive stationary bikes. Her feet dangled; she swung them back and forth in a lazy rhythm. "Remember when you asked me to teach you to cast a web?" she asked. "That's what we're doing."

"I-I've been known to get a little mixed up, but that looked like you were casting knives."

"And it looked like you weren't flinching, by the end, there."

He glanced back at the wall, at the knives still embedded there, and began to pluck them out, one by one, lay them in a straight line on the floor.

He frowned. "Fury decided our time's up. That was the message you got in the lab."

"Hmm," she said. "You're good at deduction."

"Scientist," he reminded her. "It's more or less the same thing."

"Tony Stark is shit at deduction," Natasha replied. "He's the only other scientist I really know."

"Tony Stark is a very peculiar scientist," said Banner, with more than a hint of admiration in his voice.

"No offense, but so are you," said Natasha.

He shrugged his concession. "So what do I need to know?"
She bit her lip. "The minute they decide they want him, they're going to try everything they can think of. And I'm not saying it'll be malicious. They'll mean well by it; they'll really think they're doing the right thing."

"I'd really rather people think of him as a last resort," said Banner. "You understand why."

She nodded, rubbed at her forearms, kicked her heels back against the black titanium frame of the cycle. "I want that decision to stay in your hands, as much as humanly possible" she said. "And that's why I need to know if you trust me."

He turned away from her, looked up at the scars in the wall, at the fibers spilling out between slits in the grey fabric. "I don't think that's the side of the equation that matters, Na-"

He stopped, pursed his lips, a query in his eyes.

"Natasha," she agreed. She pulled her feet up, tangling herself into a tiny ball, perfectly balanced on the handlebars, resting her elbows along her knees. "Deduction, Doc. You need to know if I trust you?"

Natasha nodded at the wall. "Your answer's right there."
Natasha was rudely awakened by her phone blasting "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" into her ear. "Clint? Are you--" she answered, mentally dragging herself from sleep into wakefulness. "I can't sleep," said Clint. His voice sounded strained, far away.

"Come here," she answered. "Clint, it's four in the morning. You know I'm down the hall. Just come here."

"Can't," he answered miserably. "I was...I think I was sleepwalking, and one thing led to another, and...I kind of got arrested? I don't know."

She climbed out of bed, pulled on a shirt, jeans, boots long enough to conceal her blades. "Kind of? Clint, where are you?"

"Well, once they realized who I was, they agreed not to haul me in, just...if I could get somebody..."

On second thought, she changed back into the clothes she'd been sleeping in, no bra, ratty sneakers, Yankees cap, strapped a pistol beneath the too-large tee shirt. "Where. Are. You?"

It turned out he hadn't gone that far.

In Columbus Circle, the rush of the fountains acted as a blockade to the sound of the cars rushing through the roundabout. The lights twinkled, diffuse in the spray of the fountain.

Natasha squinted up at Christopher Columbus' white stone face, arrogantly surveying the circle as ever, now full of arrows.

"I was half-lucid, I think. I just got angry," said Clint, looking miserably at his handiwork. "About colonialism and slavery and smallpox and...stuff."

Natasha smiled and took his hand. "Darling, don't," she said softly. She glanced at the two officers, who were staring in turns at the pair of them, up at the defaced statue. She threw in a kiss on the cheek for good measure before turning to the police.

"Thanks," she said. "He's been...since the summer, you know."

Clint kept looking despondently up at the statue, and Natasha realized that everything she was saying was the complete truth.

"Yeah, just get your boyfriend home, lady," said one officer. "We make exceptions for guys who save the world, but, you know, it's gonna be a little hard to explain that one."

Natasha looped her arm through Clint's, leaned her head on his shoulder, and, after a moment, decided that the diner was a better destination than home.

"I didn't know Hawkeye had a girlfriend," she heard one cop say to her partner. "Guess I better go back on OKCupid."
The Flame Diner on 58th Street glowed golden, its dated decor having weathered enough years to pass unfashionable and seem charming. The vines creeping across the ceiling cast strange shadows on the ceiling this late at night, one tendril dangling down over their table. Clint was staring at it, eyes full, not speaking, just rubbing at his hands.

She shoved a stack of Oreo pancakes in front of Clint's face. He stared at them, grimacing, and then doused them in syrup.

She moved from her side of the table to sit in the booth next to him, shifted her knee to rest against his, firm but reassuring pressure. "You alright?"

"I keep doing it," Clint answered. "I wake up somewhere, and don't remember what I've been doing, and it's like..."

His mouth tensed, he cut into the stack of pancakes with his fork. "All over again. Where's my coffee?" he asked.

"I told you, no coffee at five in the morning," Natasha replied. "Clint, what do you need?"

"Coffee." Clint stuffed his mouth with a forkful of pancake.

"No coffee."

"Mmmffeee."

"Mmmmmffno."

He swallowed, looked at the flowers hand-painted on the window, at the rotating dessert tray, at the floor, at the red-and-blue, glowing "open 24 hours" sign, and back at the vines, opened a packet of Sweet N' Low and poured it on his pancakes.

"Nat, I thought the statue was..."

She slid over in the booth, pressed her cheek to his shoulder. "I know. It reminds me of Loki, too."

"Conceited fucking prick," Clint said bitterly. He jabbed a finger into the little Sweet-N'-Low-hill, rubbed it around, put the finger in his mouth, then grimaced. "I hate Sweet N' Low," he informed her. "I need coffee to wash the taste out."

"What you need is to sleep," Natasha replied. "And figure out how you're going to explain defacing a monument to Fury and the fucking New York chapter of the Sons of Italy. I don't know which one is more dangerous, given the circumstances."

"You forgot the Knights of Columbus," he grumbled.

In the end, Clint ate a quarter of his pancakes. Natasha had a bite, realized that even without the multiple sweeteners he'd dumped on them, they would have been too saccharine for her, gave him his fork back, and ordered herself an herbal tea. They stumbled home, over each other's feet, as if they were drunk, and Natasha pushed her bed into a corner, put him in it, slept on the outside so he couldn't get up without climbing over her.
Natasha sent a report to Captain Rogers and Director Fury, recommending that Agent Barton be sent to a sleep clinic. She sent a text to Tony Stark, telling him that he was restoring the 1892 Columbus Monument and paying whoever needed to be paid to keep quiet about it. She sent Banner a text to say she would be in late in the morning. She went to sleep.

She slept until noon, left Clint in bed, and crept down to the lab. She sat on the sofa, not doing any work of her own, simply watching Banner, watching the methodical way he worked until her brain went quiet, reorganized itself into patterns that made sense.

That was forty-eight.
"The fuck are you doing?" Clint asked, as he barged into the lab.

Natasha put down Charmed Life and stood up from the sofa. She glanced at Banner, who was watching the proceedings over the frames of his glasses, frowning and attentive, a pen perched over a notepad where he had stopped mid-scrawl at Clint's intrusion, as if he were going to take notes on the scene.

"Reading," Natasha answered.

"You fucking ratted me out to Fury," Clint said, a low growl in his voice, his fists clenched at his sides.

"I didn't rat you out," Natasha answered. "I asked for help."

Clint took a deep breath, let his hands relax. "They're not going to let me go back to work now," he said.

"Clint, you're sleepwalking," Natasha said. "You shouldn't be going back to work."

"It was once," Clint said. "And the results were hilarious, actually, in hindsight."

"How many times has it been, really?" Natasha asked.

"Just once," said Clint.

"That's not what you implied last night. How many times?"

"Just. Once."

Natasha walked forward, lay her hand on his shoulder. "How many times?"

Clint was quiet. He glanced at Banner, who quickly busied himself, shuffling papers.

Clint ran a hand through his hair, leaving bits sticking up at odd angles. "Whenever I sleep alone."

Natasha took a long, slow breath. "Move your things into my room. Make the sleep clinic appointment. Tell me what night it is and I'll arrange to meet you when you get out. But you have to tell me if there are things I need to know. I can't operate if I'm missing vital information."

"Fine, right," said Clint. "I just don't want doctors all-"

Banner cleared his throat. "Not to interrupt," he said, "but y-you know I can do that, right?"

"Huh?"

Banner pointed around the lab at various locations that obviously signified something to him. "I have monitors for more or less every bodily function known to man. You don't want to go to a doctor, we can do it right here."

All the tension drained away from Clint’s posture. His eyes brightened, he shot Banner a lopsided smile. "Sure, Bruce, that’d be swell--"

He smacked his head. “Shit, ‘swell,’ I sound like Cap. I really do need to sleep.”
He pointed two fingers at Natasha. “Things to your room. And then...tonight?” he asked Banner, swapping the finger-pointing over one person, an eyebrow raised.

“Sure, tonight. Come down around eight,” said Banner. “No caffeine.”

Clint’s face fell like the walls of Jericho.

“Right. Sorry--” Clint frowned at Natasha. “Sorry I snapped.” He took a breath, gave her a wave, and was out, muttering. “Things to room, down at eight,” to himself.

“Thanks, Doc,” Natasha said, as she curled back up on the sofa, looking over her shoulder at the door as if she could still see Clint.

Banner frowned, and pointed at the door. “So you and he are...or aren’t...or…”

“We used to be,” she answered, and stuck her nose back in her book. “It’s better like this.”
Banner looked bleary-eyed after spending the night with a sleep-disordered patient, and as they rode down the elevator to the car waiting below, he handed her a granola bar and a carton of orange juice (with pulp). She handed him a used paperback copy of the Bardo Thodol, stabbed a straw into her orange juice, and sucked it down before they got to the first floor.

They were briefed in the car. Natasha kept glancing at Banner, seeing if he’d betray anything about Clint’s night hooked up to machines, but he did nothing but thumb through the book. She finally looked over the file she’d been handed.

She called Fury. “Black market weapons? she asked. “Director, you’ve got specialists--”

“One, we think they might be Chitauri weapons. There was a lot of debris after New York that the looters got to before the authorities. We’re trying to corral it all and bring it in. Things that came off the helicarrier. Chitauri-made guns. You two know what to look for better than most of my agents. And two, it’s a test case,” said Fury. “We need to see if this is going to work.”

“I’ve been sitting on my ass for weeks. You’re the one who decided to bench me ‘til I got the Doc in the field, and now you’re not sure if it’s going to work?” she asked, incredulous.

“Tell him I can always go home,” Banner supplied, as he pored through the file. “This is...so far out of my realm of expertise...”

“I’ll take care of it,” Natasha said.

“That’s what I want to--”

“No, not you, Director. Talking to the Doc. We don’t need him there.”

“Well, unless they need compound analysis,” Banner offered, frowning.

“Or you might need a bodyguard,” Fury supplied.

“Best as you can tell, it’s the Serpent Society, Director. You need me. You don’t even need me. You could send in a re-animated corpse to handle them. The last thing I need is a bodyguard.”

“Serpent Society?” Banner asked.

“Costumed nutcases; every once in a blue moon, they get some kind of bright idea, and need to be reminded that they’re a bunch of petty criminals picked up off the street by Roxxon Oil,” Natasha explained. “There’s a lot of theatrics and chicanery and silly snake-themed names, and--”

Banner tapped at the text. Natasha looked down, her eyes following his finger to the word above it.

“Fuck,” she said. “That’s new.”

Telekinesis.

“Is that real?” she asked, into the phone.
“As far as we know. What we don’t know is how they’re doing it. We don’t know if there’s a link to something they’ve picked up from the Chitauri. What we do know is they claim to have a couple of guns, and they’re looking for a buyer. We want to get to them first. So you’ve been authorized to buy them”

“Understood, Director,” she replied, and hung up the phone.

Banner’s eyes were on her.

She put her phone into her jacket. “Don’t worry,” she assured him. “I don’t need a bodyguard.”
Asbury Park, New Jersey, appeared to be a shell of a ghost town, of an old, once-grand seaside resort, that had then been resurrected, and had a new town built within those crumbling facades. This late in the year, though, most of the tourists were gone, the seasonal shops were shuttered, and it felt, walking down the wide expanse of boardwalk, as if they had been superimposed over a hundred-year-old film.

The town wasn’t entirely dead, though: there were still people on the beach, at picnic tables on the boardwalk. There were flyers for events pinned to kiosks, a bonfire scheduled for that night, but it was certainly quiet.

Natasha and Bruce had left their ride in Long Branch, changed to a train, walked in the oceanfront chill from the station to the beach. The sky was grey over dark water at this time of year, grey and uniformly opaque. It was still autumn but the wind coming in off the water was brisk and bitter. Natasha pulled her scarf up.

"I wonder if Steve was ever here, back in its heyday," she said, gazing at the haunting remains of the casino in front of her.

"We should bring him something," said Banner. "From the old-timey gift shops"

"Can I apologize for the sheer ludicrousness of this situation?" Natasha asked.

"I think you're physically capable of that, yes, but it's not your fault, Natasha."

"Cap should be here," she said. "Or Clint, even, even...not you. Just...stay behind me, will you? Remember what we talked about."

"Ah, don't worry," he said. "Believe me, I'm not going to forget."

"Town's quiet, it's off-season. SHIELD picked this for a--"

"They wanted to test me in a place with relatively little potential for damage," Banner agreed. “A lot of these buildings look damaged enough as it is.”

The inside of the casino was structurally barren up to the rafters and large, industrial lights that glowed brown-gold far overhead. The wind whistled through the building, the sky was framed by the windows on the opposite side. One long stretch of wall was boarded over, covered in graffiti scrawls; the other was painted with a bright mural. A busker played a rather badly-realized rendition of what Natasha thought might be a Smashing Pumpkins song. It was poorly-executed enough that she couldn’t quite tell, but she was certain it had to be from the 1990s.

“There,” Natasha said, pointing to one corner. “You’re going to come in and stand there. I’ll be--” She nodded upward. “I’ll be watching the transaction. You need me before, you know the signal. Let’s go get Steve some taffy and ourselves some lobster rolls.”

Natasha fitted Bruce with a tiny, SHIELD-issued earpiece before they returned that night, the lights of the bonfire twinkling away down the beach, showed him how to use it, how to adjust the volume. She scaled the building and eased her way into the rafters--an easy climb, with all those exposed beams, something she was grateful for on her first time out in months.

Grateful, but still frustrated.
Banner was perfect for this sort of job. He looked unassuming, he had enough nervous tics to wind a clock, and he’d been on one end or another of enough back-alley dealings of his own that he knew how to manage one.

He stood there, where she’d pointed him all those hours ago, hair ruffled, hands in pockets, pacing nervously, exactly like someone unfamiliar with this kind of arrangement, someone who was scared of being stopped by a police officer.

She assumed their contact was already there, waiting.

It took about ten minutes for her to show--a young woman, glossy black hair, dressed in an oversized black sweater. She carried a large knapsack on her back; the bag appeared to be full.

She couldn't be alone, was Natasha's first thought. Not with something so potentially valuable.

"Cash first," she said, and she slung the bag to the ground, pulling out a sheet of yellow paper. "Then you sign the agreement. Then you get the goods."

"Nobody said anything about signing anything," said Banner, fumbling with the belt loops of his trousers.

"Standard non-disclosure," said the woman. "Indemnity clauses, that kind of thing. This shit’s from space. You know that, right? Space. We don’t know what it’ll do."

"You know to use something like that, you’d have to admit to selling them in the first place," Banner said, but he pulled out the wallet.

The nice thing about the government deciding they needed to put all those metallic strips and asymmetries in bills was that it was incredibly easy to affix a GPS tracker to a twenty these days.

"You've also never bought anything that can do this," said the woman.

She pulled out a gun: it looked too familiar, even though Natasha hadn’t seen one in months: the smooth, seamless chrome, the strange, bluish fluid enclosed in some unbreakable, transparent shell.

Banner coughed. "Give me the form."

He signed, and the woman provided him with a duplicate copy, snorting at the signature. "Anthony E. Stark," she read. "Riiiiight."

"Hey, give me a break, here," Banner said, in an apologetic tone. "I'm a government employee. I don't want this getting back to anybody."

The beauty of the lie was that it was true.

The woman made an incredulous noise, but she counted the money, smiled, and slid it into her pocket.

And then, she let her hand free from the gun, and stepped away.

It floated in midair, trained on Banner.

“How--” he started.

“Don’t move,” said the woman. “Or I’ll shoot.”
“You really don’t want to do that,” said Banner.

“Then you really don’t want to move,” said the woman. She walked out of the casino, backing away from Banner and the gun, and once she had exited the building, the gun whipped around and followed her out the door.

Natasha waited thirty seconds longer, and she climbed down from her perch in the shadows.

“I don’t know what the protocol for something like that is,” said Banner.

“Well, you know what Fury would say,” replied Natasha.

Banner laughed nervously. “But you wouldn’t?”

“I assume you have the best judgment of anyone when it comes to that. There’s a tracker on the money,” she explained. “I’m going. Stay here.”

Banner sucked in another breath, let it out slowly. “I wasn’t planning on going anywhere,” he replied, as she stepped outside, lightly, quickly, following the fuzzy figure of the woman moving down the beach in the dark.

But the woman seemed to see her-- in spite of all Natasha’s precautions, and began to run.

Natasha sprinted across the sand, her feet kicking up clouds in her wake.

She caught up, tore away the sack carrying the gun, tackled the running figure to the ground a few dozen yards down the beach. It was bigger than she expected-- more muscular, and the grunt her captive let out as they crashed into the sand was most certainly masculine; she wasn’t certain now whether she was grappling with a man or a woman.

Their fingers dug into her forearms, crushing; she grabbed at her-- his--? hair, twisting it around her fingers to tug their head back.

His head.

When she saw his face, when her free hand went to grab his shoulder and felt the resistance of metal, instead of soft flesh, she froze.

It was only for a split second, but he pushed her away, back into the damp, chill sand, and dashed off down the beach.

She pulled herself up to sit, then leapt to her feet, set on chasing down the man.

But a hand on her shoulder stopped her.

“Natasha,” Banner said, hefting the knapsack in one arm. “We got what we came for.”
“I don’t want to talk about it,” Natasha said, trying to dust the last of the sand, caked like plaster, from her clothing. She leaned back against the seat of the train car, reluctantly took the ginger ale bottle Banner handed to her.

“You don’t need to talk about it,” Banner assured her. “It’s just--”

“Your watch beeping? It was fine, Doc. Didn’t bother me one bit.”

“Good.” he said. “G-good. But. No, it’s more than that. What happened, back there, at the end?”

Natasha sucked on her straw. “What about it?”

“That wasn’t the same person.”

Natasha felt the hair on the back of her neck stand on end. “No.”
Steve turned the slender stick of wax-wrapped taffy over in his hands. “I went there once, yeah,” he answered, musingly. “On the USO tour; it was…”

Steve got that faraway look he sometimes got when he realized he was talking about something that was an entire lifetime ago. He frowned and rolled the taffy between his fingers. “Everything was crowded, full of lights. Did you go on the carousel?” he asked, a hopeful look in his eyes.

Natasha didn’t have the heart to tell him the carousel was gone. “No,” she said. “It...look, it’s pretty different now, Steve.” For a moment, she thought maybe she ought to offer to take him to the carousel by the Tower, in Central Park, but she suspected it might sound like she was treating him like a six-year-old, and that was never a good position to be in with someone who was supposedly her commanding officer.

Granted, everyone else she’d done that to had deserved it.

Steve popped the piece of taffy in his mouth, chewing on it thoughtfully. “I’m not sure what flavor that’s supposed to be,” he said. “I don’t mind. Places change. I can handle New York, I figure I can handle a boardwalk I’ve only been to once. We could go down there. It’s...it’s what, two hours by train?”

Natasha filed that in the list of things Steve Rogers would occasionally mention but never actually have the motivation to do, like go back to college or visit the statue of Captain America in Bay Ridge. “Sure, Steve,” she said.

But then the hurricane hit.
The subways stopped running on Sunday evening. SHIELD had given them another assignment that morning, sent her and Banner out to an expansive warehouse on the waterfront in Sunset Park: a warehouse full of weapons fronting as a sex toy distributor.

“Please tell me the sex toys are the weapons,” she’d joked. “Because I’m mentally composing a list of people I want to send those to.”

Everything was grey--grey mist, grey sprinkling spray in the air, grey sky, grey buildings. On the cobblestone streets past the Gowanus Expressway, grey fog rose and curled around her ankles, clinging like ivy.

The minute she had assessed the danger, made note of the guards' positions, she sent Banner, without protest, to the Dunkin' Donuts down the road, and told him to order her an iced coffee and two plain crullers in an hour.

She was out, and had called in a retrieval team to pick up the weapons, in thirty-five minutes. She’d reached Dunkin’ Donuts in forty.

"I didn't order yet," he said, as she passed him a small parcel. “What is this?”

"Sample. It was easier than I thought," she explained. "I like to give myself a conservative estimate. Get me a cup of ice and the key to the restroom."

She clapped her hand over the slash in her pants.

He squinted, warily. “What did you--”

“It’s nothing,” she said. “I’m going to ice it and we’re going to go. Restroom key. Ice. And a cruller.”

He reached for her hand. “Natasha. Let me see.”

She sighed, and grudgingly moved her hand, wiping the blood from her palm on to her jacket. “It’s nothing, see? Tiny. I’ll take care of it when--”

Banner pulled out a tiny medical kit. “Stitches,” he said. “Now.”

The winds were whipping up on all three glass-faced sides of the Dunkin’ Donuts; Natasha pressed the plastic cup full of ice to her thigh until it was reasonably numb, then held her head against the wall of the claustrophobically tiny restroom as Banner disinfected and stitched up the small but free-flowing incision in her thigh.

She pressed her tongue to the roof of her mouth, turned to look down at him working, watching the needle between his fingers, silver against skin.

“That’s going to scar,” he warned her. “You have an up-to-date tetanus shot?”

“I’m taken care of. Wouldn’t be the first time,” she replied, hiking her pants back up. “You can fix it better when we get back.”

He got to his feet, she clapped an arm on his shoulder. “Thanks, Doc.”
“Call me Bruce,” he replied.

She shrugged. “I like Doc.”

The sky was growing dark quickly, the rain was coming down in earnest now; they managed to get on the last D train to Manhattan before the subway closures began.

The floor was gritty with dust and rainwater; the subway car was nearly empty. A few other damp stragglers sat toward the other end of the car, everyone’s expressions strained, checking watches and telephones for the time, tapping fingers against knees and feet against the floor in the hope they would make it home before the subway shut down until who-knew-when.

The lights seemed dimmer than usual.

She dropped into a seat, facing away from the other passengers, passed the parcel of explosives to Banner, rubbed at her sore shoulders, took stock of the rest of her body: strained, but otherwise fine. Rather damp, hair beginning to plaster to her forehead.

“You look like you should’ve gotten hot coffee,” Banner observed.

She wrung her hair out, shrugged, wrapped her arms around herself, looked up at an ad for some potboiler murder mystery, one for a pawn shop, at photocopied leaflets wedged here and there advertising weight loss studies and Jesus Christ.

“I need you to look at that package when we get home,” she said. “It’s...the sex toy front wasn’t that far off; it’s some kind of biological explosive.”

“Biological…”

“Biological as in looks like human flesh. I didn't want to leave it all to SHIELD.”

Bruce was quiet for a moment, patted the parcel in his pocket. “I’ll see what I can do.”

He watched her, frowning, fingers tapping against his knee. “Ah…” he started, and then shut his mouth, fiddling with the seam of his jacket.

“Yes, thank you,” she said, fairly certain he’d never quite bring himself to raise the question he had been about to ask.

He opened his jacket, let her crawl beneath his arm, although he seemed, for a moment, to not know what to do once she got there, and finally rested his arm around her, tentatively, a little too loosely, too self-consciously. She shut her eyes, rested her head back against his shoulder, listened to the sound of the subway car rumbling along through the tunnel.
Storm Preparedness

By the time they arrived back at the Tower, it was raining heavily.

She didn't let Banner look at the cut on her thigh again, didn't want to have to explain to him why it was healing more quickly than it ought to. She took a shower, slapped a bandage on it, one that covered it properly. At least she still scarred; she'd be able to show him a shiny white streak in a week or two and he'd be none the wiser.

Steve knocked on her door, balancing a pallet of bottled water over his head with one hand in a way that looked absolutely ridiculous for all his earnestness. He wasn't wearing the suit, but he'd put on a pair of blue jeans, a thick, waterproof windbreaker with a Captain America logo on front and back, and wings stamped the sides of the hood, tall rain boots. He might as well have been in uniform.

"Hey, Cap," Natasha said. "Storm preparedness?"

He blinked at her and tried valiantly to look at her face and not her towel. It made her wonder if he'd ever seen a woman in nothing but a towel before. For a split second, she thought, evilly, that it might be funny to drop the towel. But she suspected that Steve might consider that akin to marriage.

"I'm going to take supplies to some of the emergency shelters," he explained. "Stark said I could just...bill everything to his foundation. I just wanted to know if you'd like to-- you know, join me."

"I need to change and get Clint," Natasha answered. "But I have to go as Stark's rep."

"Right, right," Steve replied. "Natalie?"

She smiled. "That's the one. Steve?"

"What?"

"Is there a reason you brought all that water up to the forty-first floor when you just have to bring it down again?"

He stopped, blinked, looked up at his outstretched arm. "Oh," he replied. "I forgot I was carrying it."

Natasha drove, waited in the truck while the men unloaded supplies, largely to avoid being recognized.

The worst of the storm wasn't expected until the next day, and while mass transit was shutting down, the streets were full of people rushing, making last-minute trips to the grocery store to buy candles and water and batteries and food. The mood was quiet, strained, feverish.

"What else can we do?" Steve asked, when he got back to the car. And the thing of it was, the difference between anyone in the world asking that question and Steve asking that question, was that he meant it in complete sincerity, completely believed that there was more that he could do, wasn't asking it as a sign of defeat.

"We're going home to sleep," Natasha answered. "Because anything we can do right now can be done by anyone out there. And if the storm is as bad as they say, there are going to be things the rest of the week that only we can do."
They went home, gave JARVIS instructions to begin storm preparedness procedures, and went to bed.
The next day, the tension in the Tower was close to reaching the boiling point. Clint had tossed and turned all night; Natasha was painfully aware of just how little sleep she had gotten, pain dull in her eyesockets.

Banner had left another book—*The Phantom Tollbooth*—on her desk, but he barely looked in her direction when she came down to work. It was hard to tell with him, whether he was working too intently, or had withdrawn. He only stopped, once.

“Those explosives,” he said, in a brisk tone. “From yesterday.”

“Yeah?” Natasha asked.

“You’re right about them. The compound seems more like living tissue than a synthetic.”

“*Exploding human flesh,*” Natasha summarized, hearing the dubious note in her voice.

“More or less. There’s still something not right here. I’m going to keep working. But you might want to call it in.”

True to his word, he went back to work, and didn’t speak again.

By lunch, the silence was too much. “I’m going to check on Clint,” she said, finally, and walked out of the lab.

In the common area on the 41st floor, Steve was pacing, watching six different news channels all at once, blustering in spite of their reassurances that The Weather Channel liked to sensationalize big storms. Every few minutes, he’d ask if they should be out in the streets helping.

“I’m calling SHIELD,” Steve said, his voice tense, pitching higher than normal. “I don’t think we have another option.”

“SHIELD knows about the fucking storm. I’m not doing the fucking SHIELD thing when they won’t even put me on active duty. I’ve got a friend who needs help out in one of the Rockaways,” Clint said, tiredly, as he held up a rain slicker, considering it with a frown. “I’d invite you to come, but it’s way the fuck out and I really don’t know what they’d do with a bunch of Avengers at some old dude’s house.”

“Just turn the television off, Steve,” said Bruce. “It’s only going to make you more upset.”

“Stark isn’t answering calls,” Steve said. “And without air support, with a storm like this, I’m not sure how we can find out where to go. I need to call SHIELD.”

He stopped his channel-surfing on footage of a capsized boat, the ticker identifying it as a tallship, the *HMS Bounty.* “See that?” he asked, his voice rising in a growl. “There are people out there. Right now. I can’t-- I have no way to get to them.”

“We’re all thinking the same thing,” Bruce pointed out. “But look, Steve...they’re in North Carolina. You can’t--you can’t do everything.”

“I can do *something*” Steve said, punching at the remote so blindly that he only managed to go to the DVR settings.
“Look, it’s great you want to help and all,” Clint said, taking the remote from Steve and shutting the television off once and for all. “But do you have to do the fucking Cap thing when the rest of us are being sandbagged into--”

Steve stopped, dead still.

Natasha burst out laughing.

“What?” Clint asked. “What did I say?”

Steve’s eyes were bright; he had a broad grin on his face. “Barton, I could kiss you.”

“Please fucking don’t,” replied Clint. “What the hell, man?”

Steve started for his room. “I don’t need SHIELD. I’m going to Red Hook to sandbag.”

Clint blinked, and then his eyebrows shot up, his lips curling into a rather self-satisfied smile.

“And people say Stark’s the genius of the group.”

Natasha pushed herself up from the sofa. “I’ll come, too, Steve,” she offered, as Clint wrestled with his raincoat.

Banner cleared his throat. “Natasha,” he said. “Your leg. How--”

She grimaced. Her leg was far more healed than she would have liked him to know, enough that she only felt a dull ache, some itching where it was scabbed over.

“Fine,” she said, nonchalant.

“What did she do to her leg?” Clint asked, putting a hand on her shoulder, where it tightened protectively, almost possessively, enough that she pulled away.

“We’ve got work to do, Barton,” she said, sharply. “You don’t get to talk about me like I’m not here. I cut my leg. You’ve seen me worse.”

“Fucking women,” Clint said irritably, and she knew he didn’t mean it, but she crossed her arms over her chest and gave him a pointed look.

“And that’s why you’re divorced.”

He pressed his lips together, squinted at her, looked her over.

Banner sighed. “I’ll come, too,” he added. “Clint, if she looks like she’s wearing out, I’ll tell her so.”

“And I’ll listen,” Natasha added, giving Banner a grateful look. “Go help your friend. I’ll be here when you get back. It’s just some rain.”
Louder than the Wind

It was certainly some rain.

In the end, they all went to Red Hook, save for Clint, rain sheeting hard as they laid sandbags in place. Natasha’s fingers grew numb with cold, even through her gloves, and her skin felt saturated; it became a challenge to wipe the water from her face.

Banner, ironically the only one not capable of hefting a sandbag, made himself useful by toting water and food to the volunteers, assessing their medical stations, making phone calls.

She watched him out of the corner of her eye, calmly going about his business, slipping in and out of spaces as if he knew just where to stand, knew just what was needed. He stopped what he was doing without a second thought, when someone called him to take out a splinter, to diagnose a sprained wrist, and there was something in the purposeful, easy way he moved that she hadn’t seen since she’d been watching him in India.

Steve, meanwhile, had commandeered the sandbagging efforts, and gave orders in a confident, commanding way she hadn’t seen from him since the Battle of New York. It had caused a standoff with the other volunteers, at first, who didn’t like the media attention, the people snapping photos when they should have been at home, and who certainly didn’t like some big-shot kid coming in and telling them what to do, but they eventually gave up the battle when they saw exactly how many sandbags he could carry in one go.

But from the storm clouds amassing just to the south, the way white-tipped waves battered the waterfront, Natasha wasn’t sure how much good it would do. The water was already flooding the streets, covering her feet, weighing down each step, and she found herself wading more than walking.

The winds were getting harder; a blast buffeted the sandbags; Steve forced the weight of his shoulders against the wall to keep it in place, spread his arms out, pressed his shield into the neighboring stretch of barrier, while the other workers moved to stack more bags in place. Another gust blew harder; Natasha stumbled back, nearly blown off her feet.

“Widow,” said Banner, as he caught her shoulder, looked her over while she regained her footing. “Remember our agreement.”

“What agreement was that, Doc?” she asked.

“The one you lied to Clint about,” said Banner. “That I’m still holding you to.”

She sighed. “Doc, I’m fine. It was just the wind.”

“It’s some pretty strong wind, and I don’t want you tearing those stitches,” he said. “Sit down. Just for ten minutes.”

“Fi--” she started, but then there was another gust of wind, and a mournful-sounding creak that gave way to a wrenching squeal, and a crash, a boom, followed by screaming, dozens of screams, and all of their attention was diverted to the waterfront.

The pilings that shored up the water’s edge gave way, sending first rocks, then wood and concrete tumbling down. The pier was crumbling, sinking into the water, sloping downward.

“We’re done!” Steve shouted-- but the wind, the wind was so loud that even Captain America at
full volume was nearly drowned out. “Everyone insi--”

There was a loud rumble, and the squeal of buckling metal, and the building beside them began to collapse.

What had been tense, orderly cohesion snapped. People started screaming, running, as corrugated metal bent and shifted, cinderblocks broke free from their mortar. The structure leaned perilously forward, trapping the volunteers between the increasingly violent waterfront and the threat of being pelted by falling debris.

That was when they heard the screams from inside the building.

Natasha watched Steve’s eyes go wide and bright, like a child waking from a nightmare, as he pushed back at the sandbags with all his might, and yet lurched forward, torn.

“I-- I’ve got this,” said Banner. Natasha felt her own heart rate pick up, and she turned to look at him, turned and saw his eyes fixed on Steve, too.

His eyes, with a glimmer of green in them that usually wasn’t there.

She put a hand to his chest. “Are you sure, Doc?”

He didn’t answer. He took off his raincoat, handed it to her, lunged forward, toward the falling building.

She couldn’t pinpoint the exact moment when he ceased to be Doctor Banner and was fully the Hulk. What she did see was skin tinge and color, muscles ripple, shoulders broaden, and suddenly, that thing was there, roaring into the wind.

Roaring louder than the wind.

She clutched his coat in both hands.

The building crumbled around him-- he was strong enough to hold up the main structure, but no one, no one without fifty hands could have held every block in place.

But was enough that the people trapped inside got out. They got out, looking shell-shocked, staring wide-eyed, as the water spilled over the sandbags, and Steve shut his eyes, clenched his jaw so hard that all the muscles in his face tensed, just to hold the sandbags in place, though the water rushed around him, pummeled his back and neck, left him so saturated his blue uniform had turned black.

They got out, and the remains of the building crumbled around Bruce. She watched him stagger forward, one single step, and then hold himself in place, stodgy and solid as if he were made of stone.

It took her a moment to realize that she’d called him Bruce in her mind. Even now, even when he was that thing.

Maybe because he was that thing.

The building crumbled, crashing down, and there might have been a dust cloud if the rain and wind hadn’t been lashing so hard against it, but the ground still shook with the collapse.

She waited for the proverbial dust to settle, until what was left of the building seemed to have stopped shifting, rain pelting at her face, stinging her eyes and filling her mouth in spite of her best
efforts, and she clambered up into the rubble.

It took a few minutes, but finally, tentatively, some of the other volunteers followed her.

By the time they managed to dig away enough of the debris for Bruce to stagger out, from where he had managed to curl up beside a support beam that hadn’t fallen, he was an ordinary man. An ordinary, exhausted-looking man.

Natasha handed Bruce his coat. “Let’s go home,” she said softly.
Thanks For Your Service

Steve, of course, insisted on staying out, insisted on ‘patrolling the area,’ or some nonsense, insisted he'd be fine, and Natasha forced two peanut butter sandwiches in plastic baggies on him, and a 16-ounce bottle of Coca-cola, and told him to be safe.

She and Bruce shivered in the truck on the way back to the Tower, grateful for the use of the practically-a-tank-truck that Tony Stark had left with them, with his usual speech about how it wasn’t environmentally friendly or fuel efficient and it was a piece of crap but if they really wanted it, he guessed he couldn’t let it go to waste. Still, Natasha was terrified the truck would be blown off the road, would hydroplane-- and they were stopped, at one point, by well-meaning police officers who waved them down.

Natasha pulled out her SHIELD badge, handed it over.

The officer’s eyes widened, and she peered through Natasha’s half-open driver’s window at Bruce, half crumpled in the passenger’s seat, his cheek resting against the window.

“Agent,” she said.

“Officer,” said Natasha.

“Thanks for your service,” said the officer.

“Thanks for yours,” said Natasha.

“You, uh...you saw the Hulk?” asked the officer. “There was a video on Twitter.”

Bruce rubbed at his eyes.

“It’s under control now, Ma’am,” Natasha answered kindly. “We’re just heading home. You lot alright in all this?”

“Hey, I grew up in the Gulf,” said the cop, grinning. “This is nothing. Where’s Captain America?”

“Thank you! Where’s Captain America?!” One of the cops called. “We saw him, too!”

“He’s still out there,” Natasha replied. “That guy’s a real trouper.”

“Stay safe,” the police officer said. “And give the Hulk our regards.”

Bruce frowned, blinked, turned his head and finally made eye contact with the police officers. “Stay safe, Officers.”

“Huh,” Bruce said, as Natasha drove away.
Clint wasn’t back when they got to the Tower, and he wasn’t answering his text messages.

Natasha took the hottest, most scalding shower she could-- on one hand, it felt a little strange to want to be more wet after hours in the rain, but the steam and the heat and the pressure of the faucet on her neck made her feel as if she were washing the cold away.

Rubbed raw, skin flush and red, she pulled on a tee shirt (her own tee shirt), clean socks, and a pair of pajama pants, laid out a towel and clean clothes for Clint, and started down to the lab, a bottle in one hand and a book in the other.

The lights were dark, the computers all shut down. The only sound was the low hum of a ventilation fan.

She was about to turn to go when she saw his silhouette on the sofa, head down, hands clasped and balanced against his knees. Gravity dragged him down: his posture was one of exhaustion, collapse, every part of him slouched forward as if he were too weak to support himself.

His glasses were off, set on the armrest.

His breath, though, was controlled: he was awake.

"Can I come in?" She asked, venturing a step forward. "I brought a bottle of wine. I thought you might need it."

He looked up. "Oh," he said, and pushed himself unsteadily to his feet. He frowned down at himself: much like she had, he'd pulled on a loose tee shirt and a pair of cotton pajama pants with a drawstring waistband. "Forgive me the-- no one usually comes near me when--"

"There's nothing to forgive, Doc. I figured I should check on you." She waved for him to sit down as she pulled the corkscrew from the pocket of her pants. "I'm in my pajamas, too, it's like a regular party."

She took a swig, then handed the bottle over. He frowned at it. "Philistine alter ego or not, I don't think I can bring myself to drink good Bordeaux from the bottle. God, Natasha, this needs to air first."

"I learned to drink in Russia, Doc. Forgive my unrefined palate."

"And yet, ironically, you bought it. Take two beakers out of the centrifuge."

"Don't overestimate me. Tony Stark bought it. He owed me a thank-you. Or an apology. They're usually the same thing where he's concerned."

She did as she was told, filling the beakers nearly to the brim, and then set them on the floor at their feet as she dropped herself onto the sofa beside him.

"Is this what you do?" she asked, after a moment. "Just sit in the dark alone?"

"It works," he answered. He picked up one of the beakers, swirled the contents, sniffed it, set it aside. "You realize this is a two-hundred-dollar bottle of wine?"

She shrugged. "I did my research. That's why I brought it down."
He smiled, faintly, just enough that she could barely make it out in the dark, and pulled his legs up beneath him.

They drank with very little conversation, after Bruce had said something about the tannins that she had started out following but lost track of once he got onto a tangent about the cellular structure of oak, and had finally trailed off into what might have been an awkward silence if she didn’t find it so comfortable, to sit there and sip wine in the dark.

When the bottle was empty, she tipped it, with a faint smile and an apologetic shrug. “It was good, though, wasn’t it, Doc?” she asked.

“Yeah, it was...that was good,” he agreed, and ran a hand through his hair.

She got up from the sofa, dropped the bottle into the recycling bin, rinsed her beaker in the sink.

“You-- you can just leave that,” he said. “I’ve got to run the centrifuge, anyway.”

She looked back at him. “Are you going to be alright here? Alone, I mean?”

He shrugged. “I’m usually alone.”

“So are we all,” she pointed out. “Doesn’t mean we’re always alright with it.”

She picked up the book she’d brought down, from where she’d left it on the floor at her feet. “Here. In case you want company.”

She lay The Poetics of Space on the sofa beside him, and went up to bed.
Clint was there when she got back, elbows resting on knees, staring bleary-eyed at the door. His hair was damp, his fingernails were ragged and bleeding, he was wearing boxer shorts and a tee shirt he’d stolen back from her.

“You smell like sewage,” she told him.

“Showered twice,” he answered. “I don’t think it’s going away.” He swallowed, and looked up at her. “You-- I only knew you were here because of those,” he said, nodding to her damp clothes dangling from the laundry hamper and the sodden boots by the door.

She took a breath. “I was with the Doc,” she said. “We had a code green.”

He shifted over to lie down on the bed, on top of the covers, and patted the spot next to him. “C’mere,” he said.

She nodded and sat down, turned, and curled up beside him. “He chose to do it,” she said. “He saved some people, Clint.”

He wrapped an arm around her, pulled her in close like they were still lovers.

“You still smell like sewage,” she teased, but her voice was gentle, and she threaded her fingers through his, tugging his hand to her waist.

“If I have to smell it, you have to smell it,” Clint said.

“You look tired,” Natasha said.

“Exhausted. I had to row a boat. The water was…It was like, everywhere. I was so tired I ran smack into some girl downstairs and could’ve sworn it was Bobbi for a whole minute.” He gave her a pained look.

“Bobbi was in Colorado last I heard,” Natasha said. “She’ll be fine.”

“And you?”

She turned to the window, looked out at the rain, marveled at how silent it was in Tony Stark’s soundproofed tower. “I think so,” she answered. “It’s hard to tell.”

He kissed the top of her hair. “Tomorrow’s going to be better, Nat.”
Tomorrow was worse.

In the morning, they found out that chunks of the city were completely underwater, even more of the city was without power. Tony Stark had finally answered his phone, to a full voicemail box, put on the suit, and flown in from Reykjavik to rescue people on Fire Island from second-story apartments. Natasha also discovered that there were now storm refugees living in unused office spaces on three floors of the Tower, and that Steve Rogers was missing somewhere in Far Rockaway.

Natasha had left Clint in bed, because, in spite of the fact that he'd thrashed all night, he had stayed beautifully, mercifully asleep. She assumed all it took was pure exhaustion.

The moment she walked into the kitchen, she regretted it.

"I don't care if you parachute them in!" Stark was shouting into the phone, from his perch atop one of the marble counters. "There's no way they're opening the bay. I need two electric cars, and enough cable to divert energy from the Tower to the financial district, and Rhodey’s down in Jersey, he says-- No, Pep, I don't care, I don't care how you do it, get a bunch of helicopters or something, and I need enough food here at the Tower for two hundred people, and I have to go, because if my dad could spend decades looking for that star-spangled moron, I need to spend at least a day!"

"Phone," Natasha said, reaching her hand out.

Stark gave her a rather guilty look. "No, no, Pep, sorry, it's just, tensions are high, Cap's disappeared somewhere, and I--"

He looked around the room, shrinking into a corner. "I need to be somewhere else. Here, here's Nat, she'll take care of coordinating."

He shoved the phone at Natasha, and she had a tiny moment's triumph as she curled her fingers around the Iron Man-themed protective case--

--And then realized it was lighter, slimmer, and had a more glare-resistant screen than her phone. She sighed.

“Oh! Mark Nine!” Tony said, pointing at the phone. “Try it out. Send me any bug reports, like, run the full Black Widow QA on it when you get a chance, thanks, Sweet Cheeks, I’m out to find Cap.”

He blew her a kiss and backed out of the room.

Natasha sighed. “Pepper?” she said into the phone.

She could hear the other woman let out an apologetic groan. “Right,” said Pepper. “How’s Legal these days?”

“Legal’s fine, if you like dealing with a house full of superpowered men who apparently all have sleep disorders,” Natasha replied.

“Sounds j-just like R&D,” Pepper said. Her voice creaked, she tripped over her words. “I’m sorry, it’s four in the morning here, Tony called in without any sort of preface, I didn’t even know he
was in New York--"

“Believe me, I’ve been exactly where you’re standing,” Natasha assured her. “Just tell me what he’s told you.”

Natasha sat down in a chair, kicked her feet up on the table, turned on the television so she would have some sort of sense of what was going on, and listened while Pepper explained the situation. The two women coordinated supply lines, donations, and a plan to supply limited power directly from the Tower’s ARC reactor to the southern end of Manhattan Island, for emergency purposes only. Pepper hung up to make calls to the necessary Stark Industries divisions, and to the Maria Stark Foundation. Two hours later, Pepper hung up in order to take a nap, and Natasha dialed Fury.

“Stark, where the hell have you--”

“It’s Widow,” Natasha replied.

"Widow," Fury repeated, drawing out the last vowel, his voice pitching upward-- almost a question, but not quite.

"You sound like you want something," said Natasha. "You sound like you want me to guess what something you want."

"You sound like you have no idea," said Fury.

"Director, usually I revel in those conversations where we both say one thing and mean another and confuse the hell out of everyone else in the room," said Natasha. "But it's seven in the morning, I went to bed at three. I didn't get any sleep the night before. My current home city, in the midst of rebuilding from an alien attack, is now reeling from a massive storm and has had its infrastructure dismantled. I have an insomniac supersoldier who's currently MIA, my somnambulist partner who’s destroying beloved monuments, a man in a robot suit who's in the middle of a lovers' spat with his CEO and seems to have developed claustrophobia, or something, and the only other sane person in this place is a man with a list of nervous tics as long as my kill record who turns into a sentient tank when he gets angry. So could you please talk to me like I'm four years old for once?"

Fury was quiet a moment. "So I take it your assessment of Banner has changed?"

She laughed. She put down the phone, grateful that no one else was in the room, and laughed silently until her shoulders shook, until she could feel her eyes stinging with tears.

"Widow? Did I lose you?"

"No," she said, instantly regaining composure. "And yes, I would say that's accurate. He keeps his cool, thinks fast on his feet... He's not trained, Sir. I can work on the training."

"I saw the footage," Fury said. "All the television stations have been playing clips from last night. It certainly helped with PR, after this summer. As much as Rogers has been a media darling, and Stark is..."

"Believe me," said Natasha. "I know how Stark is."

"Yes," agreed Fury. "It's been difficult, there are still a lot of mixed feelings about the Hulk. Now people are changing their tune."

"Is this a new tactic?" Natasha asked, outright. "I'm not going to ask him to do it, Sir. I won’t ask.
You can ask him, or you can wait and see what he does.”

“You don’t need to protect him,” said Fury.

“I do need him to trust me,” she replied.

“Support-only,” Fury replied. “Things like last night. Enough to get people on our side. We won’t ask him to do any damage, only help. We can arrange more public-- whose idea was that, anyhow?”


“What?” asked Fury.

“Reinstate Barton, and I’ll talk to Banner.”

“You just said it yourself; Barton’s a-- well, if not a threat, he’s at very least a potential danger to himself and others.”

“So’s the Hulk,” Natasha retorted. “You want me to talk to Banner, put Barton back in the field. He needs it, Sir.”

“Talking isn’t good enough. You need to convince him.”

“Convincing is going to cost more, Director.”

“How much more?”

“You want me to get this team to work,” she said. “I need Rogers.”

“That’s two for one, Widow.”

“Just be grateful I’m not asking for Thor.”

She heard the door slide open behind her. “Nat, Nat, I need you in here now,” Clint called from where he stood in the entry.

Natasha turned, found herself staring at an image on the television screen across the room, still on mute.

“Sorry, Director. I have to go. It’s Rogers.”

She hung up the phone, walked slowly into the other room, watched Iron Man rise up out of the rubble, carrying a battered and bruised Steve Rogers. Steve’s uniform was torn, an angry gash in his side. He clutched his shield over his chest as if he was hanging onto it for dear life.

As Iron Man landed safely on the ground, surrounded by a crowd that seemed to let out a collective sigh of relief, the camera zoomed in close. Steve’s eyes were shuttered; his skin was greyish. He was missing a boot; his ankle looked twisted and swollen, purplish in places.

And then she saw the tiny hand peeking out from beneath the shield.

"Fuck," said Clint. "I hope that kid is alive."

"I hope Steve’s alive," Natasha murmured.

The two of them sat down on the sofa, arms locked around each other, Natasha’s head burrowing
against Clint's shoulder. They watched the camera pan the crowd-- certainly some had been keeping vigil since the news had spread that Captain America was missing-- a few of the people were wearing shirts or jackets with stars on them; one little girl clutched a small plastic frisbee-shield. Some of them were holding candle nubs, now extinguished.

They were surrounded by grim destruction; collapsed houses, downed trees, flooding in patches, reflective in the cold grey morning light.

The camera stopped on a man, maybe in his thirties, his expression drawn and his lip curled under, a welt raised above his brow, a child sleeping in his arms. Natasha could tell, from the way his eyes didn't move, remained fixed on the scene, the way he seemed not to breathe for stretches at a time, that he must be the father.

Iron Man met the EMTs, carefully lifted Steve's shield, let them disentangle the child-- a baby, really, no more than a toddler-- from Steve's sluggish arms.

The mask came up. Stark rested a metal finger against Steve's cheek, said something-- Natasha thought, knowing Stark, that it was probably something like "come on, buddy, you've slept long enough."

Whatever it was, Steve looked up, blearily, and not seeming entirely lucid. Stark lowered him slowly to unsteady feet, supporting him as he coaxed Steve to stagger over to the waiting ambulance.

One of the EMTs accompanying the child gave a thumbs-up signal, and the crowd broke out into cheers.

And then Iron Man was crowded by reporters.

They watched Stark, face mask still up, looking somewhat haggard, speak for about twenty seconds, a seriousness to his expression that they had both seen, but that the media rarely caught a glimpse of. He took a small step back, gave them a wave, flipped down the mask, and took off.

IRON MAN RESCUES CAPTAIN AMERICA: STILL MORE WORK TO DO said the ticker that ran across the bottom of the screen.

The camera panned to Steve, who was sitting in the back of the ambulance, rather sheepishly objecting as an EMT cleaned up the cut in his side, and another checked his eyes.

“Tony showed up,” Bruce observed from the doorway.

Natasha looked up.

Bruce ambled over, sat down beside them. “I was out. Helping.”

Natasha pulled her feet up, dropped them across his still-damp knees.
“Did you sleep?” she asked. “Am I the only one here who sleeps?”

He raised an eyebrow at her, but said nothing, merely looked ahead at the television set. "No sound?” He asked.

"Yep,” replied Clint, as he drummed his fingers absently on Natasha's shoulder. "We still have electric and Internet, but the storm disconnected the sound."

“Clint messed up the audio cables again,” Natasha explained.

“I can’t hear half of what they say, anyway,” Clint said cheerily. “Your loss.”

Bruce caught her foot with both of his hands, kneading at her arch with his thumbs.

She glanced back at him. His eyes were on the television set, not her.

"It's more fun to make things up than to listen to what these assholes actually say," replied Clint. "Look, he's probably saying something about blah blah storm preparedness blah blah--”

She flexed her foot into Bruce’s grasp, and he pushed back harder, working tiny, rough circles across the center of her sole.

The television cut to a clip of Steve, still pale, but relatively more alert, speaking to a news reporter, surrounded by a circle of people, on a desolate beach, marked with wreckage. His uniform was still torn, his cowl was pushed back, he had a bruise coloring along his cheekbone.

The TV station cut to footage, clearly amateur footage, of the night before, of Steve in knee-deep water, dragging a makeshift raft to shore, handing a child out a window, scaling a house to reach a woman trapped on the second floor. It cut to the group of them the night before-- well, the men, really, Natasha noticed with relief. No one had really filmed the mousy woman in the Stark Industries jacket.

Bruce’s fingers stopped working, clasped uncomfortably around Natasha’s foot. “Can we--”

“Got it,” Clint replied, and he switched the television off before they had to see any footage of the Hulk.

Natasha started as her phone began to play the opening riffs of Shocking Blue’s “Venus.” “It’s Pepper,” she said. “Just a minute.”

She turned on speakerphone.

“Pepper? I’ve got Clint and the Doc with me.”

“Oh. Hello, boys. Everyone-- you’re all holding up?”

“Fine, Pepper,” said Bruce. “Tony found Steve, so--”

“I know, he called me,” Pepper assured them. “Well, JARVIS made him call me. Look, you need to tell Tony that I can’t get him cars, but we’re working on the refugee supplies. There should be a delivery in the next forty minutes...we’ve got linens, towels, shampoo, soap…”

“Oh, good, Clint needs soap,” Natasha said, purely for Clint’s benefit.

“Food’s coming later,” Pepper said. “Until then, you can distribute whatever is in the Tower cafeteria.”
“We can?” Clint asked.

“Tony said--” Pepper started, and then groaned. “Oh. Of course he did.”

“We’ll take care of it,” Natasha said, and she sat up straight, swinging her feet out of Bruce’s lap once and for all. “Go get some sleep, Pepper. You’re an angel.”

“A goddess on a mountaintop, to be precise,” Clint added, once Natasha had hung up the phone. She hoped.
Call for Backup

When all the blankets and pillows and bath towels had been handed out, bed assignments organized, when the crowd had been ushered down to the company cafeteria for dinner, Natasha headed upstairs and into a bluster.

"I don't care," Tony Stark said with a snarl. He had his hands clenched into fists, pressed down hard against the back of the sofa. "It was a shit call. You don't get to make that--"

"There was a kid!!" Steve shouted back, unnecessarily loud for the distance between them. He was propped up in a recliner, crutches leaning against the wall, ankle bandaged. "I wasn't going to let a kid die!"

Natasha wove quietly between them, toward the bar-- because no space designed by Tony Stark was complete without a fully-functional bar-- and reached for a glass from the cabinet.

"Yeah, well, before that," Tony replied. "You could've called for backup when you saw how bad it was."

"You could've answered your phone," Steve retorted.

"Oh, fuck you and your self-righteous bullshit, Cap," said Tony. "I was at a fucking conference in fucking Iceland, that happened to be just a little bit important. We were buried in a fucking think tank. As soon as I got the news, I suited up and left. I was in New York by the time you decided to pull that little stunt, so don't put this on me, Captain Enormous Prick of the Year. You didn't fucking call for backup."

"Well, darn, I didn't think getting a lecture from Hans Zarkov's obnoxious twin was what I needed to save the day."

"Oh, don't you even compare yourself to Flash Gordon. You, sir, are no Flash Gordon. Kit Walker, maaaaybe, maybe on a good day, when you're not fucking letting burning buildings collapse on you!"

"Excuse me," Natasha interjected nicely, as she refilled her water glass, "but I think I get to be Kit Walker."

"Hmm, true, you do carry guns and are super hot in pur--" Tony started.

Steve's cheeks were rosy with heat, the rest of his face pale with rage in a way that made him look even younger than he was. He had a deepening bruise along his cheek, a welt on his head, an abrasion along his jawline. He leaned forward in his chair, as if conviction alone could propel him forward, fingers digging into the arm rests. "There was a kid!"

"You already said that, Cap. Pretty sure the kid didn't keep you from calling for backup. You're lucky that beam caught your foot and not your head. You know what it was made of? Iron. You know what they call me?"


"Yeah, I considered that but it's a little long for a headline and not very descriptive, and anyway, then I joined a team, and the point of a team is, oh, backup. How do you propose you would have gotten out alive without, you know, my sweet jaws-of-life setting?"
"I had a plan," said Steve.

"One that involved starting an underground colony of mole people?" Tony asked. "Because I don't think you had any food down there, and my way was obviously a lot quicker. Just admit it, Cap. You need me."

"I don't need you," Steve answered, a growl in the back of his throat.

Tony shrugged, held his hand up in the air in defeat. "Fine," he said. "I was all into trying this team thing, but if that's how you feel about it... See how you like it when I don't call you."

He waved a hand, as if to dismiss the whole thing, and walked out of the room.

"You know, I don't often defend Stark," said Natasha, "but Steve, he was only trying to help. We saw it on television. You were in pretty bad shape."

Steve scowled. "It's not that...it's not...I don't even give a damn that he gets the news crews in there and and takes all the credit. I don't do this for the credit. But he makes me sound impotent..."

Natasha opened the freezer, took out a pint of ice cream and a spoon. "Here. Clint won't care if you eat his moose tracks."

Steve gave her a tired look, and accepted the ice cream gratefully. His knuckles had been scraped raw, they shone, red and angry, as he clutched the spoon.

She crouched on the floor beside him.

"What's the problem, Steve?" She asked. "You're safe, the kid is safe, Stark came in after all, it's great PR for the Initiative, for you, for--"

"Do we want that?" Steve asked.

"Want what?" Natasha replied, even though she knew what he would say. She rolled back on her heels to sit on the high-polished wood floor.

"Good publicity," Steve replied. "For the Initiative, for...whatever this is. I don't know if we should want people to trust us."

"Steve," Natasha replied. "You're team leader. The rest of us follow you. You've got to know the answer to that."

"But I don't," he said.

"So figure it out."

He held the spoon thoughtfully in his mouth. "I trust us," he said, slowly, after removing it. "I trust Barton and Banner and, hell, I can't stand to be in the same room with Stark, but I'd trust him with my life."

"Shall I ask if you omitted me for a reason?" Natasha asked. "Or yourself? Why didn't you list yourself?"

"I hear how you talk to people," Steve replied. "I...hear you negotiate. Make exchanges. Extract information. Persuade people when they don’t realize they’re being persuaded. I'm pretty sure you do it to me, too, and I'm not sure whose side you're on."

"You could ask, Steve. You're our team leader. I report to you."
"Fine," he said, caution in his voice. "I'm asking."

She tipped her head up to face him more directly, pushed her hair back from her face. "I report to Fury every day," she answered. "You're team leader in name and station, but I'm technically his liaison. It's your job to lead-- which, by the way, you can't do if you don't believe in what you're leading. It's my job to see that this team coheres."

"Your job according to SHIELD," Steve said. "And I don't know if SHIELD has our best interests in mind."

"SHIELD has SHIELD's best interests in mind," Natasha replied. "But mostly, SHIELD's best interest in protecting humanity."

"The Nazis thought they were protecting humanity, too," Steve pointed out. "From outside threats. You know."

"Well, if it makes a difference to you, SHIELD gave me my humanity back," Natasha answered. "So I owe them a little bit of faith."

"I don't have anything else," Steve said, and he started attacking the ice cream again. "I feel like a prisoner a lot of the time. I woke up, and these people told me what to do, how to be. Nobody really gave me a choice."

"So," Natasha said. "If you could do anything you wanted to do, what would it be? If you didn't feel like you had to do this?"

Steve shrugged. "Probably still this," he answered. "But if it doesn't stick in my craw to know it."

"Do me a favor?" she asked. "Give it a chance. Fury might surprise you."

"And you?"

"Me?" Natasha asked. "I'll keep doing what I'm doing. I can't tell you to believe me. Sometimes I lie. But I think you can trust me. If you want a second opinion, ask Clint."

"I'm pretty sure Barton's in love with you," Steve said, shaking his head.

"He's in love with saving people," Natasha answered. "I stopped needing to be saved a long time ago. We both know that."

"You act like you're married."

"We act like partners," Natasha explained. "Good marriages do, too. It's just like a smaller version of a team. If we can get the whole team to work like that--"

"Good luck getting Stark on board with that," Steve said with a grimace.

Natasha shook her head. "I don't know. I think he's closer than you expect."

Steve snorted. "As long as I don't have to act like I'm married to him."

"Steve?" Natasha asked.

"What?"

"Give Stark a chance, too."
It's Messy

Of course, the problem with trying to give Tony Stark a chance is that Stark generally made you not want to give him a chance after about five minutes.

The penthouse was still a wreck-- construction priority had been given to the spaces needed for the people actually living there-- Bruce's lab, the bedroom suites-- and working on the lower floors.

To this end, Tony was holed up in one of the guest suites on the 39th floor, which were nearly identical to their own rooms, save that they were fully furnished and decorated in a luxurious, pearl grey monochromatic color scheme that reflected light in a hazy way, giving everything in them soft edges.

"I'm out, Nat," he said, fluttering his hands at her at a way she assumed was probably intended to be meaningful. "Sorry, I tried to do the team thing; it didn't work--"

Natasha gritted her teeth. "That was hardly a try," she answered. "Do you give up on everything that easily? I'm shocked you have a company--"

"Pepper," Stark pointed out, pointing at Natasha as if to remind her.

"Or a girlfriend," Natasha added.

"What, Nat?" Tony asked. "I can't help it. I'm a catch. Have I ever told you I've been named Ti--"

"Yes," Natasha answered. "Stark. Look. Steve's barely an adult. He's a kid with a lot to prove, and he's afraid of fucking up. You just rubbed his fuckups in his face."

"Kid, my ass! He's a Captain in the military. He led the Howling Commandos. He defeated fucking HYDRA, he--"

"That makes somebody a soldier, not an adult," Natasha replied. "We were both prodigies, Stark. You know what it's like. When did people start forgetting you were a kid?"

Tony groaned. "Nat, I can't do this. Fury still hasn't given us any kind of satisfying answer for why SHIELD went behind our backs-- went behind my back, when I know more about weapons design than pretty much everybody else in the world combined, even if I don't like it. It's been months and we don't have an answer."

"I don't know why you thought listening in on all my calls would get you anywhere," Natasha replied.

Tony blinked, and then grinned, sheepishly. "I was wondering why you'd been letting me get away with it," he said. "Nat, your phone calls aren't even sexy. You have a boring life for a super-spy."

"I like my off-hours boring," Natasha answered. "Dealing with you lot is enough excitement for even the stoutest hearts, thank you. What if I told you I'll have an answer on Phase Two in seventy-two hours?" She asked.

"Are you going to have an answer on Captain Dickhead?" Tony asked. “Because I just don’t think I can work with the guy.”
"What is it with you two?" Natasha asked. "You've had it in for him since you first set eyes on each other."

"Right, because I’m supposed to be pals with my old man’s best buddy,” Tony replied. “You did notice the part where he disapproved of me slightly more than the old man did, right? Because that takes some doing.”

“Your father didn’t--”

“Don’t talk like you ever met my father.”

"Stark," Natasha said. She stalked over to the sofa, sat down, hands clasped over crossed legs. "You met in the middle of a crisis. He’s having a lot of trouble adjusting as it is. I've seen Steve get angry at street corners. You weren't there the first time we went to Penn Station, when he looked around and he argued with us that no, we must have taken him to the wrong station, because he just couldn’t believe they would have demolished the original building. He was in denial like he was mourning. You're his friend's son, and his friend is dead, and you're twice his age."

"That's completely inaccurate," Tony answered. "He's technically more than twice my age, but even if you’re going by his physical age, I'm basically five thousand, eight hundred and eighty-five days older than him, and he’s something like nine thousand, six hundred and fifteen days old, so I’m really a little more than one and three-fifths his age."

“You’re deliberately ignoring my point,” Natasha said. “Have you tried… I don’t know; do you know how to make friends?”

“Of course I do,” said Tony. “You pay somebody a lot of money. What? Why are you looking at me like that?”

She crossed her arms, tilted her head at him. “You can’t put all the blame on him when you’re not willing to make an effort.”

“This isn’t kindergarten, Nat. We don’t have to be friends; we have to work together. And I don’t think I can, Nat. I just can’t. I’ve got-- look, I’ve got a new breakthrough on the suit designs, and this one-- I just know this one’s going to be it, and once I finish with that, I’ve got to meet my year-end deadlines, or Pep’s going to have my head, so the last thing I need is some pep talk about teamwork, and--”

Tony frowned, tilted his head back, a mirror approximation of her own posture. “Since when did the Black Widow get so fucking interested in teamwork, anyway? Aren’t you supposed to kill your mates?”

She raised an eyebrow. “ Aren’t you glad you never got to find out?”

“Little disappointed about that, still, actually,” Tony assured her, with mock cheer. “So, what’s the deal? What’s in it for you?”

“It’s an assignment,” Natasha replied, with a shrug. “Frankly, if someone told you you needed to find an agent equal to the likes of a Norse god, a time-traveling supersoldier, a man with superintelligent robot armor, and a giant human battering ram, who would you choose?”

“Ahh...don’t know that many agents, to be honest, but I see your point,” Tony replied. “So, have we made enough trouble for you yet?”

“I’m just concerned about your bluster about leaving,” Natasha replied. “We--"
“Don’t you dare say you need me after you put that big fucking ‘not recommended’ stamp on my face,” Tony said irritably. “It’s not bluster, Nat, and-- ouch. No, I mean, I take that back, it’s not your fault. You folks can keep the Tower and all the amenities, and if you need me to write a check or something, just keep me on speed dial, but unless there’s another alien invasion or something, I’ve got enough to take care of in Malibu. My-- Pep moved in; she has things in my closet, it’s all-- it’s messy.”

“Just…” he said, slowly, rubbing the back of his neck, inclining his head to her. “I have to do this right now. And I can’t take any more grief from anybody who can’t appreciate me putting my neck on the line. Maybe if Cap says he’s sorry, I’ll come back. But, just...consultant status. Like I’m supposed to be, anyway. Let’s do that.”
Refugee Operation

In the morning, Tony came down to the lab, exchanged a few words with Bruce, winked and waved at Natasha, and was gone. Natasha didn’t ask where he was going. She’d given him back the Mark IX prototype after staying up all night to cannibalize some code from JARVIS so that she could use Tony’s old Mark VIII to trace any phone with the altered OS...and hoped Tony would be too eager to get the phone to market to notice her tinkering.

Tony walked out the door, then caught the door in mid-swing, and spun around.

“Nat!” he said. “Oh, Nat, I almost forgot, could you do me a tiny favor?”

“How tiny?” she asked.

“This isn’t going to turn into a dick joke, is it?” Tony asked, raising an eyebrow. “Because if it is, I’d much rather just supply my own punchline.”

“Oh no,” Natasha replied. “I’m sure it couldn’t be that tiny. What is it?”

“Ha, ha. I need somebody to run this little refugee operation. You’ve worked with refugees; you think you can handle it?”

Natasha sighed. “I pulled a hunted political dissident out of a conflict diamond region in the dead of night under heavy fire,” she answered. “That’s not really the same kind of refugee.”

Tony just stood there, looking at her, hands folded in supplication. “Pllleeeeeease, Nat?”
That first day, she worked in the Tower, trying to make sure the operation on the lower floors was running as smoothly as it could.

But Clint took the truck out again, went back to the Rockaways, started helping with the cleanup.

He called her that afternoon. There was a tension in his voice, one she couldn’t quite place.

“Are you all right?” she asked.

“It’s...yeah, I’m fine. Remember I told you about that girl I ran into the other night?”

“Bobbi’s doppelganger?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah,” Clint said. “Yeah, her. She’s...out here, helping with the cleanup. I’m trying to-- anyway, that’s not why I called. I...I know you promised to help out at the Tower, but the folks there are gonna be fine. You want to get the whole team out here. There’s...the Occupy folks are trying to organize, but we could really use some muscle.”

Steve’s foot was still swollen, and while Natasha knew how quickly he healed, it would still be days before he could walk on it enough to help in a disaster area. Natasha had been watching him gnash his teeth all day any time he heard the word “Stark,” and a few times when he heard a word that sounded reasonably like “Stark.”

She put him in charge of the Tower operations, changed her clothes, and went down to the lab.

Fifty-four.

“Doc,” Natasha said, her jacket folded over one arm.

He turned toward her. “Natasha,” he said, with a soft, lopsided sort of smile. “How’s your leg? You’ve been on it all day, haven’t you?”

“Doc,” she said, tiredly. “The leg’s fine.” She lifted it an inch off the floor, rotated her hip, lowered it again. “See? It just itches a little, is all.”

“That’s the stitches,” Bruce said. “Hmm. Maybe it wasn’t as bad as I thought.”

“Still appreciate it, Doc. Look,” said Natasha, stepping forward toward him. “Clint and I are going to go out and try to do some cleanup. We could use you.”

He rubbed his chin. “Do you need brains or brawn?” he asked.

“Probably both, Doc,” she said, but she smiled at that, in spite of herself. “Steve’s down for the count, so whatever you’re willing to give...I think they’d be grateful to have a doctor out there, and, well…”

His brow creased.

She shrugged. “Only if there’s an emergency,” she said. “I won’t ask you. You can make the call.”

He didn’t hesitate. “Give me ten minutes. Have you eaten lunch?”
It wasn’t worth lying about. He went to the fridge and passed her a sandwich, carefully wrapped and labeled with her name: hummus, avocado, tomatoes, cucumbers, feta cheese on crusty whole wheat bread.

She ate on the way out to the Rockaways.
Out in the Wreckage

Hours of volunteering stretched into days, and then into weeks. Sorting donations, cleaning up wreckage, decontaminating houses ripe with mold: utterly unglamorous, badly needed work. Bruce thrived on it, and she saw a little bit of the man she’d tailed in India, always seeming to have a preternatural ability to guess where he was needed next, how to calm people, how to get someone with an injury or an illness talking to him like an old friend while he treated them.

Even out in the wreckage of other people’s lives, she would find him for lunch, and the two of them would sit together and take a few quiet minutes. It wasn’t like the lab; there wasn’t time for reading, and their definition of quiet had to be a bit more flexible, especially once Clint invited himself to what he dubbed their “lunch bunch.” Bruce had even endeavored to make lunch for Clint as well, before Clint got irritated by the lack of meat and started bringing his own sandwiches, which, ironically, tended toward peanut butter and jelly.

Clint started sleeping better. Full days of heavy labor knocked him out cold by eleven in the evening, and he started migrating back and forth between their rooms, leaving Natasha alone a little less than half the time.

Steve, left out at first, performed admirably as the sort of authority figure the world’s most luxe refugee camp needed. People listened to him-- and if they didn’t listen to Steve Rogers, they listened to Captain America. He was the one at the Tower, so he was the one who spoke to reporters. He had a talent for allocating resources, and for resolving conflicts between people, which left Natasha wondering why he was so poor at resolving his own conflicts.

The sixth day after the storm, a morning talk show invited him in as a guest, to meet the little girl he’d rescued from the rubble. He bounced her on his knee, put a tiny Captain America beanie on her head, and, in all his unadulterated sincerity, sat for one of the most-reblogged photos on Tumblr.

As long as the Avengers were on television, in the newspapers, on the internet, out generating positive publicity, Natasha’s conversations with Nick Fury tended toward approving rather than strained. Fury put Clint back on the active-duty roster. He let Natasha run missions with Clint instead of with Bruce.

Steve was still refusing to do field work. Natasha asked him about it only once.

“What are they going to do?” he asked. “Punish Captain America? They should have thought of that before they made me an icon.”

In two weeks, Bruce transformed three times. The situations were nearly identical, so much so that he offered up a sheepish joke about it the last time: buildings that were thought to be structurally sound enough at least to salvage turned out to be somewhat more unsound.

The Hulk was met, on all three occasions, with cautious distance, terrified expressions, and, at the end of it, applause.

Bruce would finish the job, find a quiet place to transform back (they had gotten into the habit of bring a spare change of clothing for him so as not to have to take donated clothing from the bins after the first time), and then, very tiredly, bring himself back to whatever site they were working at.

If it was possible, they would drive home early on those days.
Each time it happened, Natasha would wash up, change into pajamas, bring a bottle of wine down to the lab, and the two of them would sit and drink in silence until the bottle was gone. After that first time, she had to dig into wine she’d actually purchased herself, but if Bruce could tell what made a seventeen-dollar bottle of wine cost seventeen dollars instead of two hundred, he wasn’t saying so, and Natasha honestly couldn’t figure it out.
The accident wasn’t Bruce’s fault; it wasn’t what he always feared, what he always worked so hard to prevent. The Hulk didn’t lash out at anyone.

The two of them had left the group, found a spot a ways down the road to sit and eat their lunch in quiet, when the truck came down the road, seemingly ignorant of the traffic cones that had been erected as a warning, where a good chunk of the concrete had been washed away by the storm; heard the screech of the tires, and ran toward the vehicle as it skidded, spun out, and tumbled over the edge, toward the water.

Bruce transformed as he ran, and Natasha called for an ambulance, sprinting far behind, as one foot, in a workboot, lifted off the ground, and a different foot, enormous, green, bare, crashed down into the sand in its place, leaving an indentation so large that she had to skirt around it.

The frame of the truck was half-submerged in water, twisted, collapsed in where the roof had smashed up against a rock. The Hulk dove into the water, tugged at the car-- but it wouldn’t budge, and Natasha realized that it must be stuck on something beneath the water. The Hulk tore the roof from the vehicle and pulled out a small child, still in a carseat, who coughed water and clung to a sodden stuffed dog, and a woman with an ugly head-wound and a arm that was twisted at an odd angle.

The Hulk wasn’t tender; he dropped them-- not roughly, but unceremoniously-- on the ground and went back.

The woman was fumbling to take the child out of the carseat; Natasha leaned beside her to help while Clint arrived with two of the EMTs on the volunteer staff, who went to work looking over the woman and child.

Once the woman had her child in her arms, Natasha stood and went to the side of the road. A hunk of car flew out of the water and landed again with a splash. The Hulk had been underwater for a long time-- certainly not too long for the Hulk, but perhaps for an ordinary human.

“Was there anyone else in the car?” Clint asked.
“My husband,” the woman said, trembling. “IS-- is--”

The Hulk emerged, carrying a man from the twisted frame of the vehicle, climbed up the perilous incline carried the man to the road, and dropped the man to the ground beside them.

As soon as Natasha saw the man’s pallid skin, the way he lay, limp and unresponsive, she shivered.

One of the EMTs left the woman, went to practice CPR on the man.

The Hulk’s nostrils flared at he looked on.

“Bruce,” said Natasha, and she caught the creature’s eye, although it made her lose her breath to do it. “You’ve done enough.”

She heard the woman behind her let out a sob, as it became clear that the EMT’s efforts were failing. When the woman began to cry, the child did, too, and then the Hulk lunged, picked up an enormous chunk of broken concrete and hurled it, far out, into the ocean with a howl.

Natasha took a step away. “Let’s...all move back,” she said. “Slowly.”
But the Hulk was already stomping off, footsteps so powerful that the ground vibrated, roaring and swinging his fists at rocks and rubble all the way down the incline, and then started tearing at what remained of the vehicle, tearing it into little pieces like a child throwing a tantrum.

Natasha waited with the others until the ambulance came, but it had been hard for her to remain attentive, her gaze constantly swinging back, over her shoulder. The Hulk tired of decimating the car, and moved down the shoreline, and her eyes followed, squinting to see the ever--vanishing green speck. She thought she could, at any rate; she wasn’t sure if it was her imagination.

She let the EMTs comfort the grieving woman; that had never been her strong suit. But she wondered if she should find Bruce.

Instead, she left his spare clothing out near the entry to the beach, and went back to work; work kept her mind off what she’d seen. She waited until he came to her, some time later, human again, his skin tinged grey, his hair pasted flat against his head, his eyes weary.

She left aside the fencing she had been repairing and joined him.

Bruce didn’t straighten up, didn’t smile. “Do you-- can we--?” He pointed his thumb back toward where Clint had parked the truck.

She nodded. “Let’s,” she agreed, and went to find Clint.

Natasha was down to her last bottle of wine. Bruce had obviously guessed she would be coming; he had set out two actual wine glasses and the corkscrew she had left in the lab. She set it down at Bruce’s feet before curling up at the opposite end of the sofa, her back against the armrest, facing him, feet up on the cushion.

He didn’t say anything; he just leaned forward and opened the wine.

“How do you want to talk about it?” she asked, when he passed her a glass.

“I never want to talk about it,” he answered. He pulled his own legs up onto the sofa and leaned back on the opposite armrest in order to face her. He propped his feet in front of him, as if they were a barrier, a protection.

“Ought you to talk about it?” she said, and she took a sip of her wine.

“Natasha,” he said, giving her a plaintive look. “There are things even you can’t persuade me to do.”

“If you decide you want persuasion, will you tell me?” she asked.

He sighed, ran a hand over his face. “I...I’ll think about it,” he said.

They fell into their usual silence. Natasha looked up, watching him sip his wine, but he rarely looked back at her. He instead seemed intent on the wine glass, on his knees, on the stack of papers sitting on his desk.

She lowered her gaze from his face, following his eyes to his knees, and then down to his feet. They were bare— he had been walking around the lab on its cold, cold floor, in bare feet; she had at least had the presence of mind to put socks on. She stretched her leg out a little, inch by inch, and finally prodded his bare big toe with her stockinged one.

His foot twitched, and he looked up at her, his brow furrowing.
“Your feet are cold,” she said.

He smiled, a tired smile, that barely reached his eyes, and pressed his own toe back against hers. “I didn’t notice,” he assured her.

Natasha chewed on her lower lip. She straightened her foot, matched it up against his. “You’d think Stark would have state-of-the-art heated floors in this place, with all the other unnecessary gadgets he’s installed.”

Bruce refilled his wine glass, then held the bottle out for her. “I shouldn’t be here,” he said. “It’s too dangerous. I can’t-- I can’t control him, when bad things happen…”

“Like today?” she asked. “But he didn’t hurt anyone, Bruce. He helped. You know that.” She filled her glass, put the bottle on the floor.

“I know that. I think he knows that, even. But it’s…he’s like a child. He only knows how to respond with emotions, when something goes wrong.”

“Y-- he--but he didn’t take it out on anyone,” she pointed out. “He tore up the car. He went for a walk.”

“But even that was a struggle,” Bruce said. He curled his toes inward, pressing them up against her own. “Then next time-- if it’s something worse, it might not be-- I can’t guarantee…”

“Send another resignation, if that’s what you want,” Natasha replied. “I’ll still try to make you want to stay.”

He laughed. “You want me here that badly?” he asked.

She smiled back at him. “It’s part of my job.”

He was quiet for a long moment, swirling his wine, but now he kept his eyes on her, pursing his lips thoughtfully.

“I think I might go away,” he said. “Not--” he added, when she tilted her head toward him. “Just a few days.”

“To Dayton?” she asked.

“Mmmhmm,” he said. “See Aunt Susie, maybe.”

“And your father,” Natasha supplied, when he didn’t.

He pulled his foot away, pulled his knees back up to his chest. “How did you--”

“Stark,” she replied. “Stark knows he’s in the hospital, but doesn’t know what hospital, or why, does he?”

Bruce shook his head. “Not unless someone told him.”

“How often do you go?” she asked.

“A few times a year,” he said. “Whenever I…” He took a long swig of wine, slowly, moving his jaw almost as if he were chewing. He watched her, tilting his head to one side, his eyes lighting for a moment.

Then he swallowed, and straightened, put his feet down on the floor with the finality of a man
who had just made a decision. “Would you--”

“Yes?” she asked, when he hesitated.

His posture changed, his shoulders lowered, as if he had been somehow defeated in the course of a moment. “Like another book to read while I’m gone?” he asked, nodding toward his desk. “I know I haven’t loaned you a new one in a couple of weeks.”

“Oh,” she replied.

“I got out A Wizard of Earthsea for you before,” he said. “That, or the Chronicles of Prydain. They’re both there; you can take whichever one you’d like. Take them all. You might as well.”

She took the stack of books with her on her way out, along with an apprehensive tightness in her chest, because she was certain she knew what Bruce had very nearly asked her.
Two days later, Natasha's phone rang.

It was a ring she didn't recognize at first, and it took her a moment to place the song, since it didn't seem to fit in with Tony's usual preference for old pop numbers, but once she recognized Kermit the Frog's voice singing about being the color of leaves and being overlooked, she snatched the phone up off her desk.

"Bruce?" she said, her lips curling into a smile. She left her desk, curled up on the sofa, propped herself against a pillow.

"So I have a name now?" He asked. She could hear an unusually bright tone in his voice: eager, hopeful.

"Bruce," she repeated, rolling his name slowly over her tongue. "It comes with the discovery that I have a phone number. What do you need?"

He laughed, softly. "How and when did you sneak the Kant into my bag?" He asked.

"Not telling," she replied. "Have you read it before?"

"Not this one," he answered. "I've read his Critique of Pure Reason, back in college, not since..."

"I think his writing on nature is more your speed," she said. "The way he combines moral responsibility with practical natural science and cosmogony. You'll like it."

"You started Earthsea before I left, didn't you?" He asked, and she could still hear amusement in his voice.

"Just the beginning," she replied. "Just through the part with his aunt. And then I read the opening of The Book of Three. They're...oddly similar, aren't they. Although Taran's not so much of a prick in the beginning."

"It gets better," Bruce said. "That is, he gets better."

"I like that whatever-his-name-is is a prick at first," Natasha replied. "It makes him more believable, that he's actually got something to learn."

He was quiet, on the other end of the line.

"You didn't call me to talk about books," Natasha observed. "Are you alright?"

"Fine," he said. "I'm fine; Dad's behaving himself as well as he ever will; Susie's good...she...she asked if I'd come back for Thanksgiving."

"Ah," Natasha said, suddenly uncertain of the turn this conversation was taking. "And..."

"Twice in that many weeks is...the thought is exhausting," he admitted. "But I don't know where else I'd go. So I was thinking...it's Steve's first one, since the ice, isn't it? And he's not going to have anyone to spend it with, if not us. I could cook, if you-- that is, if you're willing-- if you're free--"

"Bruce, it's not as if I celebrate with SHIELD," Natasha answered. "I'll talk to the boys."
"Did you put him up to this, Nat?" An irritable Tony Stark demanded, the phone connection staticky and garbled.

"Put whom up to what, Stark?" Natasha asked tiredly.

"Cap. To this ridiculous Thanksgiving bullshit. Like we're some kind of family."

Natasha groaned. "Steve invited you?"

"Don't play me like you didn't know, Madame Superspy," Tony retorted. "And now I have to be the bad guy, because, sorry, there's no way I'm having Avengers Happy Family Dinner. I don't know how Cap fooled himself into thinking he actually wants me there, Pep would kill me, I mean literally kill me, but if I have to turn him down, I'm the asshole who doesn't want to kiss and make up."

"Stark, he can't possibly be that unreasonable," Natasha replied.

"Yeah?" Tony asked. "You try talking to him, then. I already told Brucey, I'm not coming. There is nothing you can say to make me spend a fucking holiday in that godforsaken hellhole."

"Stark?" Natasha said.

"What?"

"I wasn't going to try. Happy Thanksgiving."

“Yeah, happy Genocide Day to you, too.”
"Steve," Natasha said softly, "you didn't really expect him to come, did you?"

"Well, no," Steve said, a little grudgingly. "But it's, well...Thanksgiving. It's supposed to be a family holiday, and since none of us really have families, you know. I thought it would be nice."

"Steve, it's not you," said Natasha. "Stark has-- he has a whole life on the West coast. His company is mostly there, his girlfriend is there-- I don't know how much you know about it, but family holidays in the Stark household weren't exactly--"

"That's in his file," Steve said. "I don't see what that has to do with me. I know Howard Stark was an ass. You'd think if Tony Stark realized it, he'd strive to be better than an exact replica."

"You made the gesture, Steve. You did your best. Just because he turned you down-- it doesn't mean he's rejecting you."

Natasha took a deep breath. She pulled out her StarkPad, scrolled through surveillance feeds.

Steve rustled his newspaper, setting it down on the table. "I still can't get used to colored pictures in the Times," he said quietly, almost sheepish at the fact. He peered over at her StarkPad.

"Here," she said, handing it over, a security camera still of Tony Stark's face, blown up. "What do you see?"

"An even bigger ass than he is in person," Steve answered. He frowned, reorienting the pad vertically. "What am I supposed to be looking at?"

"His eyes."

"They're...dark, I guess?" Steve said. "They look like Howard's eyes. Is this a trick question, because I'm terrible at tri--his pupils are dilated."

He frowned. "Really dilated. What's wrong with him?"

"You'd call it shell-shock," Natasha replied. "Watch him, the next time you see him. You know how he’s never stayed here more than eighteen hours since the Battle of New York? The man panics every time he sets foot in this building."

Steve went incredibly still. "But he was fine," he said quietly, after a moment. "I thought he was dead, and he got up like nothing happened. He wanted to go eat Ar-- Middle Eastern food."

"I can only tell you what I see," Natasha replied. "That’s my job, Captain. I can’t give you answers."

Steve looked down at his newspaper, grimaced, tapped at the paper with his fingers. "Are you telling me I owe him an apology?" he asked, through gritted teeth.

"You don’t owe him anything," Natasha replied. "Just-- Stark does enough wrongheaded things that you’re perfectly within your rights to be angry about. Be angry about those. Not this. It’s just dinner."

"I know," Steve said, slowly, with some reluctance. "I'll try. But it's no joyride for me, either. I keep...thinking I'm seeing people who can't be here. Places. Things. I just--"
“What?” Natasha asked.

“Not to change the subject, but are we really letting Banner put Jamaican jerk spices on the turkey? That seems sort of...blasphemous.”

Natasha burst out laughing.
Natasha drove out to Newark to pick Bruce up at the airport on the morning he flew back from Ohio.

She didn’t tell him she was going; he hadn’t given her his flight information, but finding that sort of thing out was simple enough. She had him paged to the ground transportation desk as soon as the passengers deplaned from his flight, and a few minutes later, she had a very confused-looking Bruce walking toward her.

He stopped when he recognized her, then picked up his pace, hefting his knapsack up more tightly over his shoulder. She smiled, crossed her arms over her chest, and leaned back against the front of the desk.

He stopped when he reached her, his brow furrowing, and he lowered his knapsack to the floor. “Is everything...is something wrong?” he asked, glancing around.

“Everything’s fine, Doc. I thought you might like a ride home; that’s all.”

“You drove all the way down here for--” he started, still quizzical, but then he smiled. “Did you think I’d get lost?”

“You never know,” she answered.

They were both quiet for long enough that Natasha decided that if she didn’t fill the silence, Bruce would stand there, looking at her, for another minute, at least.

She jingled the car keys. “Come on, let’s go.”

Natasha had just pulled out of the airport parking lot when Bruce cleared his throat. “Let’s go somewhere,” he said. “Not home.”

“Where did you have in mind, Doc?”
Gardens

Asbury Park was colder than it had been three and a half weeks before. Whole sections of the boardwalk had been torn away, exposing support struts and sand beneath. The buildings along the boardwalk were boarded up; the pinball museum had lost nearly all its windows; Madame Marie, the psychic, had lost the door to her little stand.

They had stopped, on the way into town, at a drugstore, bought bottles of iced tea and a bag of popcorn, and they found a bench that wasn’t overturned, and sat down, looking out at the ocean.

“Is it better or worse than you expected?” Natasha asked.

“I don’t know,” Bruce replied. “I didn’t really know what to expect. Some...better. The Casino’s still standing. But I didn’t expect the boardwalk to look like this.”

They finished the popcorn, crumpled up the bag and disposed of it, walked onto the beach.

Bruce was wearing his usual, grubby cloth sneakers. He stopped, just far back enough on the shore that the waves wouldn’t catch his feet.

Natasha walked slowly out to the stone jetty that jutted into the water, the waves came up, splashing around her feet, catching at her jeans, occasionally spraying her coat. She closed her eyes, let the wind whip across her face, held her arms out to catch the breeze on her hands.

When she turned back toward the beach, Bruce was standing there with his phone out, at shoulder-level.

She waved. “Are you taking my photo, Doc?! she called at him.

“What?!” he called back, loudly enough, with enough strain in his voice, that she actually believed he hadn’t heard her.

She bit her lip, raced in, her feet sinking in the sand as she ran. “You’re taking my picture,” she said, when she caught up to him, lips stinging and cheeks hot from sprinting in the brisk air.

He gave her a wide-eyed look, and slipped the phone into his back pocket. Grinning, she lunged forward, and though he tried to sidestep her, she barely had to put in even minimal effort to outclass him.

Her fingers curled around his phone, and she tugged it out. “Stark is going to kill you when he finds out you don’t have a passcode on here,” she said, as she flipped to his photos.

“Tony doesn’t snatch my phone out of my pocket,” Bruce pointed out, and he held his hand out, patiently, for her to return it.

She scrolled through the photos; he had taken ten photos, in quick succession, as she stared at the sea, turned toward him, waved, ran toward him. The last few were blurry, she was a blur of denim and leather and kicked-up sand. But in the first image, the one taken in profile, she seemed almost regal, surveying the ocean with a care-worn look that she wasn’t used to seeing on her own face, her head held high, her hair blowing in the wind, winding dark curls behind her, the sea spray crashing at her feet as if she were some kind of ship's figurehead come to life.

"I look tired," she observed, as she handed the phone back to him.
"You deserve to be tired," he said.

She rubbed at her eyes. "If I'd wanted to be a mother, I would have had children," she said quietly.

"I'm not sure what's the right thing to say," Bruce admitted, but he caught at her elbow, clapping it gently. "You're the only woman in the group. People expect you to be a caretaker. Wrong or right."

"It's less-wrong than some things they could expect," Natasha admitted with a sigh.

He stepped away, dropped his hand, put a little distance between them. He started to walk, away from the shoreline, back toward the collapsed boardwalk.

"We all take care of each other, in our own way," she said. She followed after him, glanced at his free hand, dangling at his side, and shoved her own hands down deep into her pockets.

"But you more than most," he said, dragging his feet in the sand, enough to make deep furrows, as if he were digging rows for a garden.

"I owe more than most," she said. "Steve would take care of me if he knew how. Clint takes care of me. You take care of me."

"You're easy to take care of," Bruce answered. "Like mint. Or pumpkins. Something that grows anywhere, as long as you stick it in the ground. You tend to do most of it yourself."

"I don't know," Natasha replied. "Some people have greener thumbs than others."

Bruce coughed against the back of his hand.

"No pun intended," Natasha said. "You're the one who started with the gardening metaphor."

She frowned for a moment, hesitated. "Does the other guy garden?" she asked.

"Ahem." He gave her a sidelong look, hooked his thumbs over his own pockets. "He tramples gardens."

She shrugged, shot him a crooked smile. "Sometimes you need to dig shit up."
Heads and Hearts

In the end, they bought ten turkeys between the four of them, roasted them early in the morning in the huge ovens in the Stark Tower cafeteria, and drove them out to the Rockaways.

That is, Natasha and Clint drove them out, while Steve and Bruce cooked their own dinner.

It had been over three weeks, and the lingering refugees in the Tower had been able to go home, or at least had found a better place to sleep than an office building.

Steve convinced Bruce to do a less-spicy herb-rub on the turkey, in exchange for agreeing to fried yucca and mashed plantains on the side. Steve made his mother’s stuffing and gravy, Bruce added creamed collards and brussels sprouts with pecans and diced ham to the menu, Clint attempted a pie before going to the bakery and buying dessert, and Natasha bought the wine from the wine shop downstairs.

There was a lot of wine.

The evening was quiet, solemn, an air of exhaustion looming heavy over the dinner table. Steve crossed himself, bowed his head, said grace, and the others awkwardly joined in to one extent or another.

They ate, mostly in silence, until they were stuffed, and drank red wine until Natasha felt pleasantly sleepy and Bruce and Clint were both dozing in their seats.

Steve pushed his chair out. "Might as well wash up," he said.

"You cooked," Natasha replied, following his lead. "I can do it." She began removing dishes from the table, stacking them up, piling the silverware on top.

"I don't mind," Steve said. "It gets done faster with two people."

Steve in the kitchen looked like something from a magazine spread: a tall, chiseled, perfectly-groomed young man in a crisp buttondown shirt and slacks, apron tied over his front, gloved hands deep in the suds in the sink, cheeks pink from the steam rising off the near-scalding water.

Natasha began loading the plates into the dishwasher, putting the leftovers into salvaged plastic takeout containers.

"They didn't even make it to dessert," Steve observed, glancing at the pies on the shelf: four pies for four people. Bruce had insisted that that was his aunt's rule, that you always had to have at least as many pies as mouths at the table. Clint had taken it to heart and come back with apple, pumpkin, pecan, and banana cream.

"They're tired," Natasha replied. "The Doc has been transforming more than he likes to. Clint's started working again, and...Clint's job is a punishing one."

Steve scrubbed at a skillet and scowled. "Do you feel like you're doing the right thing?" he asked.

"Right in what way?" Natasha replied. "Which thing are we talking about?"

"Dragging Doctor Banner into something he doesn't want to be part of," Steve replied. He put the skillet down, rested his hands on the counter, gave Natasha an even look, his mouth a firm line. It was more expectant than judgmental.
"Are we speaking as friends?" Natasha asked. "Or am I speaking to you as my team leader?"

"It’s kind of hard not to be both," Steve admitted. "Sometimes I don’t know what to do about that."

He looked down at his dripping gloves, frowned, pulled them off and set them aside. Natasha took a knife, cut a big hunk of the apple pie, and set it on a plate in front of him. "You want ice cream?" she asked.

"I always want ice cream," he replied.

She went to the freezer, pulled out the half-gallon of Breyers vanilla, scooped some onto his plate. Then she pulled herself up onto the counter facing him, sat with her feet dangling, bare knees peeking out just below the hem of the pretty, plaid wool skirt she’d put on for the holiday dinner.

She tapped her fingers along one knee. "The Doc’s tricky," Natasha said. "I don’t think it’s that he doesn’t want to be part of the Initiative. It’s that he has two very valuable sets of skills, and one of them is dangerous. He doesn’t want to use it unless it’s absolutely necessary. The definition of “absolutely necessary” is up for debate. It’s no different from-- say, you have a gun. You don’t want to shoot the gun if you can find a non-lethal way out of whatever situation you’re in. Different people are going to the gun faster than others."

"Well, in this case, the gun is a person, and shooting the gun takes a toll on him," Steve said.

"Steve," Natasha replied, softly. "The Doc's no more a gun than you or I. The difference is that he actually gets to choose when he's a gun. Tell me you don't wish there were days you didn't have to be the Captain."

Steve looked at her, a little slack-jawed, fork paused in midair, vanilla ice cream dripping from its perch.

"You could," Natasha said. "You could if you wanted to. Just put the costume aside and be Steve Rogers, and decide what you stood for on your own. You could go get married, have kids, get a job, buy a house. Give it up, and no one would blame you."

"But I can't," Steve said firmly. "To do that would be to flagrantly disregard what I've been given. It would mean knowing that there were people I might have helped, and didn't. I have the ability to change things, I have a responsibility to--"

Natasha shrugged. "You can," she replied. "You just choose not to."

"It's hardly a choice," said Steve. "No one would--"

"Plenty of people do," Natasha replied. "I might, if I thought they would let me live."

Steve was quiet. "Oh. You know, these might not be things you should tell your team leader."

"I'm not talking about SHIELD," Natasha replied. "SHIELD wouldn't have to make a decision about whether to let me live. Someone else would get to me first."

Steve pursed his lips. He poked at his pie, stared at her, blue eyes bright with worry.


"We changed subjects," said Steve. "We went from the Hulk to Captain America to SHIELD."
You’re jumping to another subject to put rhetorical points on the board. They're not synonymous.”

"Who do you think SHIELD is named after, smart guy?" Natasha asked, cracking a smile.

Steve flushed and looked away.

"Fine. Back to the Doc-- He wants to help," Natasha said. "You should have seen him in India. He cares, cares so much about people, about doing good. He's not all that different from you."

Steve's mouth twitched.

"I'm not going to ask him to use that thing unless he has to, Cap," Natasha said. "You should know that about me. And I think I have SHIELD more or less convinced, after Sandy. I'm just hoping I can convince you."

Steve flinched. "But how do I know I want to be convinced?" He asked. "I'm still not sure I can trust."

Natasha reached into her bra; pulled out a tiny silver data drive. "Heads up," she said, and tossed it across the counter.

Steve caught it in one hand, his reflexes perfectly-timed. He frowned, scrutinizing it, as if he could see what was on it if he stared hard enough.

"What's this?" He asked.

"Phase two," Natasha replied. "Everything. Schematics, locations, access codes. Everything. And the order to shelf the research, not that anyone was complaining now that the Tesseract’s out of our reach. They’re not willing to destroy anything, not even for you, but I thought this was a fair compromise. Full transparency. Think about coming back to work, Cap. We need you."

"Why do I get the feeling, every time I talk to you, that I'm not the head of this operation?"

"You're not," Natasha answered. "You're the heart."
In the end, Natasha and Steve decimated an entire pie and a half, the full half-gallon of ice cream, and made an appreciable dent in the first season of Buffy The Vampire Slayer, before Natasha fell asleep on the sofa, presumably splayed out with her head on Steve’s chest.

That was how she woke up the next morning, although somehow they had acquired a blanket in the night.

Steve blinked awake when she stirred.

“You could have gotten up,” Natasha told him. “You didn’t have to lay here all night.”

He shrugged, grinned, flicked at her hair. “You looked comfy; I didn’t want to wake you.”

She flicked back at him. “Does this mean I get you back, Cap?” she asked.

He gave her a very plaintive look. “You’re going to get me back one way or another, aren’t you? I might as well agree now.”

He leaned over, pressed a kiss to her cheek. She smirked, put a hand up to the warm spot his lips had just vacated.

“That was a…” Steve stammered, blushed. “It was just a, you know…”

“I know what it was, Cap,” she assured him. “Don’t worry about it. You’re gorgeous, but you’re too young for me.”

“I’m not that youn--”

“You’re too young for me,” Natasha repeated. “I said don’t worry. It’s allowed.”

“Oh,” He pushed himself up to sit. “Thank you. You know. This being Thanksgiving, and all.”
Christmas shopping in New York City was unlike anything Natasha had ever done. Bitterly cold, walking up and down sidewalks between stores, climbing onto subways packed full of people carrying shopping bags and wrapping paper, she was surrounded by tiny twinkling lights at every turn, on lamp posts and storefronts and potted shrubbery. There were bundled-up locals, heads bowed over cell phones or venti Starbucks, families visiting with children dressed in their best, little girls with matching dolls going to the American Girls store, the Christmas Spectacular, Cirque du Soleil, the Nutcracker ballet.

The display windows of the big department stores were decked out, Macy's telling the story of Virginia O'Hanlon and her letter to Santa. Union Square and Grand Central Station were squeezed tight with tiny villages of vendors displaying holiday wares.

Natasha had lost Clint in that maze of candy-cane-striped booths: turned around a corner and he'd vanished, as if they were stalking a mark down a tightly-packed market street more akin to Europe than the States-- maybe Venice, she thought, one of those winding streets that turned a corner and led nowhere.

Holiday shopping was still a strange ritual, after so many years, the vast majority of her life, spent without them. She suspected her gift choices were too functional, too much about fulfilling a need, especially now that most of their needs were covered by the eccentric generosity of Tony Stark. She was trying to be fun about it, but she was still uncertain: even in the years Clint had spent married to Bobbi, the two of them had always exchanged gifts like a boring married couple: sent each other a request for a single item, received it wrapped, usually a few days after Christmas, so they could buy things on sale.

But this year, she had more people to consider.

She had bought Steve's gift-- a gift certificate to the Lee's Art Shop down 57th Street. Their prices (according to Steve, Natasha knew nothing about art supplies) were on the high side, but it was hard to argue with a three-minute walk when someone presented you with a gift certificate.

Clint was getting some ridiculous special edition My Little Pony that had been released exclusively at San Diego Comic-Con, and that he'd been bookmarking eBay auctions for for months, but still hadn't managed to score. And the usual slew of silly little things they always ended up exchanging-- after the Battle of New York, she'd actually managed to find a Hawkeye tee shirt; she'd bought it in every color even though it was ridiculously overpriced.

She had decided she should buy something for Stark, but he was easy enough. A nice bottle of scotch ordered online, shipped to California-- with a nice bottle of vodka for Pepper, while she was at it, and that was done.

She had no idea what to give Bruce. Books seemed like the obvious choice, but it seemed too rote, too simple, something they did too often. So she was peering over shelves of trinkets, hoping to maybe find him something from India that might remind him of the home he'd left without seeming unkind.

But she still had a week and a half. She should be able to find something in time.

Down the rows of booths, she saw dark hair, a familiar squint-- reminding her too much of someone who shouldn't have been there at all. She peered at the man, wondering over his appearance, his mannerisms too familiar.
She started toward him, but somewhere in the crowd, she lost the man, though she was certain he hadn’t seen her. She pulled her coat tighter; silently chastising herself. It couldn’t be him; she knew it couldn’t.

Instead, she headed over to the booth where she’d seen him, a booth full of tiny trinkets and tchotchkes.

She turned over a tiny silver figurine in her hands, then put it down as she sensed Clint's approach. "Nat?" He asked. His voice was tense, pitched high, not what she expected from Clint, holiday shopping.

She turned. "What's the matter?"

He showed her the video on his phone, the video of a bearded man spouting rhetoric, accusing the United States of terrible things.

Some of them were true.

"Who is this?" Natasha asked. "Why haven't we heard of him?"

It escalated quickly. The Mandarin struck a military base in Kuwait, a military base full of civilians. The braves were away echoed in her ears, after she saw the footage, the recording he’d played on hijacked airwaves.

"Why aren't we on this?" she demanded. This time, she called Fury. "There's a fucking terrorist on the loose; why aren't we on this?"

"We can't get a location," Fury told her. "The U.S. government wants to jump all over this. I'm not comfortable doing anything until we have a location for certain."

"He's not a fucking Mandarin," Natasha said. "European. Indian. A little Ashkenazi Jewish, maybe. And he's acting like he has fucking wet dreams about being Osama bin Laden. Why is he calling himself a Mandarin? It doesn't make sense."

"He keeps telling this fortune cookie story," Fury replied. "About how fortune cookies aren't actually Chinese."

"They're American," Natasha agreed. "From a Japanese recipe. I thought everyone knew that. What's your--oh," she said. "He's American. It's a ploy. We have a domestic terrorist. You'd have to order a domestic strike. That's why we're not on it."

"We've been ordered to sit it out, Widow. Directly from the Vice President. I think some Washington assholes are getting touchy about being outperformed. Don't worry about it," Fury assured her. "We both know it's some kind of two-bit publicity stunt; we can let the little boys deal with it, and if the Feds can't handle it on their own, they'll let us know."

"You're very optimistic about the Feds," Natasha replied.

"I've got bigger fish for you to fry. Expect a packet later today."

"Sir?" Natasha ventured, not knowing what the answer would be. "I want Barton."

"You've got Barton," Fury replied. "But you've got Banner, too. I want you to have a big, big shadow."
"Hmph," said Natasha.
Amateur Mistakes

Having Clint back made things easier. She didn't feel that mental twinge, that reminder that she was fighting without backup every time she sent Bruce away.

The mission was routine; Natasha had to break into a laboratory on Long Island and retrieve encrypted data from their network.

Clint was covering her. She'd called Bruce, once she'd dismantled the security system and was sure the place was empty, and sent him down the street to wait at a nearby diner.

"Order us fries, Doc," Natasha instructed. "Cheese fries with mozzarella, not American, and pancakes for Clint. Chocolate chip or something else gross, if they have them."

She always felt a tiny, tense moment, when she sent Bruce on an errand instead of asking him to actually help, as if he might resent being assigned gopher duties, but every time, without fail, there was the exhaled breath on his end, long and slow, and his voice always sounded lighter once he was done.

"Pancakes and fries, Widow," Bruce agreed. "Breakfast of champions."

All she had to do was copy the data; she'd crack it back at the Tower. But one of the files that came up as she scanned the drive piqued her interest. Once the data was finished transferring, she pocketed her copy and pulled out her phone.

A scurry of motion caught her eye; Clint was on it in the same instant; arrow notched and aimed at--

"A rat," Natasha observed, just as Clint loosed his arrow smack into the middle of the rodent. It let out a painful, bloodcurdling, hissing squeal, and lay there, flopping for a few moments before it dropped dead.

Clint frowned as he retrieved the arrow. "Heat signature's all wrong for a rat," he observed, pulling off his night vision goggles to scrutinize them. "It was running hot, looked like some kind of mech-- did Stark update these when I wasn't looking?"

"Don't ask me," Natasha replied. "As far as I know, he's still giving us all the cold shoulder because the one time he was right, Cap couldn't take it." She held up the phone. "Give me one second, I need to call something in."

She dialed.

"I'm sorry, Agent Romanova," JARVIS said, in his pleasant, mechanical monotone, "Mr. Stark has been called away, and I've been informed that I must decline any invitations for either Christmas or New Year's on his behalf."

Natasha groaned. "Did Steve call?" She asked.

"Three times," JARVIS answered.

"Look, I'm not inviting Stark to any holiday parties. Just tell him to call me when he can. It's urgent."

She began dialing Pepper when the room exploded, a blast ripping through the laboratory.
"Nat!" Clint cried. He leapt toward her just as the flames surrounded them, and wrestled her to the ground behind one of the steel lab tables, which deflected most of the heat. Her brow caught the end of one of the tables with a clang, a sharp pain stabbing just above her eyesocket, and she winced.

She coughed as the smoke cleared. "I did a sweep when we came in," she said, mystified. "I didn't catch--"

He stroked a lock of her hair away from her face, kissed her cheek. "So, we all make amateur mistakes," he teased. "I missed it, too. You alright?"

"Apart from you crushing my ribs," she answered.

He coughed and rolled off her, held out his hand to pull her up.

The damage to the room wasn't as bad as it might have been-- papers were incinerated, the floor, ceiling, and furniture blackened, glass equipment shattered, the monitor of the computer she'd been working on melted. She checked to make sure the files were still in her pocket, located the fire extinguisher and put out the few lingering flames.

The rat's corpse was gone.

"Status, Barton?" Natasha asked.

Clint was examining his singed suit. "Fine. You?"

"Just some broken ribs," she answered.

"Ha very ha," he replied. "I...don't think there's any way we can clean this up."

“I’ll call Fury when we get out,” Natasha replied. “We’ve got what we came for; we don’t need to stay.”

She sent Bruce a text message, one word: Order.
They tried to clean up as best they could, from singed SHIELD uniforms to tee shirts and jeans, rubbing soot off their faces where they could. Clint, after further inspection, had a spatter of red, rough, patchy burns over his forearm, spilling out around his arm guard.

"That's what you get for not wearing sleeves," Natasha said kindly, sucking at her teeth sympathetically as she dabbed antibiotic ointment on it.

"Ow, fuck, Nat, are you sure that's the right stuff? You're killing me."

"Complain to the Doc if you don't like it. I'm sure he'll do a better job. There, all better."

Natasha had come out of the explosion more or less unscathed, apart from a reddish welt that was slowly purpling into a bruise, just over her eyebrow, the only damage she sustained from Clint hastily knocking her to the ground.

Bruce was sitting in a booth, picking at a salad, and reading The Epic of Gilgamesh, her latest addition to his slowly-growing collection.

When he saw them come in, he was on his feet in a flash, eyes darting from Natasha's head to Clint's arm. "What-" he began.

Natasha chuckled. "We're fine, Doc," she assured him

Bruce met her gaze and held it for a moment before he relaxed slightly.

"There was an explosion," Clint explained, "but it was itty bitty. I think it was a weaponized rat."

"A what?"

Natasha smiled, pressed a finger gently to the tender spot on her brow, and then unfixed her hair from its ponytail, shaking her head to let her hair fall in her face and conceal the bruise.


He slid into the booth just as Bruce returned to his seat opposite.

Natasha hesitated for the barest moment before dropping into the space beside Clint, leaning into him, cheek pressed against his shoulder for a moment, and he slung his arm around her as she surveyed the food that was waiting for them.

There were two milkshakes, a stack of blueberry pancakes, and a pile of steaming golden fries covered in cheese.

"I don't know what I ever did without you, Doc," Natasha said, snagging a French fry.

"Ate fifteen minutes later, I presume," Bruce replied, as he held his cup up, wagging it around to request a refill on his iced tea. "Is everything alright?"

"We talking about the food or the mission?" Clint asked, around a mouthful of pancake.

"Easy as pie, Doc," Natasha answered. "Only...

"We don't have any pie," Clint observed. He waved the waiter down for a slice of key lime pie.
She held out the drive. "Along with all this bio-business, which I'd love for you to trawl through, there's an entire file on Potts?"

"Potts?" Bruce asked. "Pepper? Tony's Pepper?"

"The same," Natasha replied. "I called Stark first; she can get edgy about these things, and I didn't want to alarm her if it was legit. I'm sure SI has business partners who'd be under investigation by SHIELD. But he's not picking up, so I tried her, too. No one at fucking Stark Industries is picking up."

"What else are these people working on?" Bruce asked.

"I don't know; that's the encrypted data," Natasha replied. "It'll take me a few days to get at it. Meantime, I think I need to tell Fury. He's not going to be happy. Stark's not going to be happy, either, if these are friends of his. And if SHIELD is tracking Stark, if this is personal, I want to make sure we don't--"

Natasha's phone began playing Secret Agent Man.

"Maybe not," she muttered, and answered the phone.

"You have the data?"

"Yes, sir," Natasha answered.

"Good; we're going to need that."

"Look, I'm going to need a cleanup crew over at the location," Natasha replied. "There was an explosion; we couldn't leave undetected. Too much damage."

"Done. Can I get your status?"

"One hundred percent, sir. Minor burns, nothing else. Sir?"

"Go ahead, Widow."

"What does this have to do with Stark?"

"Stark?" Fury asked. "I don't know what Stark's said to you, but I have him working on something entirely different at the moment."

"Not--". Natasha swore under her breath. "Sir, we might want somebody on Stark," she replied. "Just--I'm sending the data."

She attached the drive to her other handset, the SHIELD-issued one, in spite of the fact that she suspected the security on the phone Stark had given her was better.

Fury was silent. "I'll get a West Coast team on it right away," he agreed, after a moment.

"He didn't know?" Clint asked, glancing sidelong at her over the edge of his milkshake.

Natasha shook her head. "It happens, occasionally."

She tried calling Stark again. And then Pepper.

There was still no answer.
Happy

Steve was cooking when they got back, four pans on the stove at once, rattling around the kitchen like a steel ball ricocheting around a pinball machine, wielding a spatula in one hand and tongs in the other with the same frenetic pace as a pair of flippers faced with a multiball.

It smelled delicious-- like butter and meat and parsley and pepper.

“What’s the occasion?” Bruce asked, as they filed into the kitchen.

Clint opened the refrigerator, pulled out three beers, popped the caps and passed them around.

“Steve, are you drinking?” Clint asked, after having closed the fridge.

“I’ve got my root beer,” Steve answered, pointing to the glass bottle of Boylan’s on the counter. “I hope you’re all hungry...I...didn’t know what else to do, after the news...”

“News?” Clint asked.

Natasha hopped onto a stool, took a long gulp of her beer.

Steve stopped, looked at all of them. His skillets sizzled and hissed behind him. His eyes were wide, mouth tight. “You know Happy?” he asked. “Happy Hogan, Stark’s--”

“Of course I know Happy,” Natasha replied. “You don’t forget a man after you’ve had his head between your legs.”

“Nat, you didn’t!” Clint exclaimed, wiping beer from his lips, sounding appalled.

“God, no. The man’s a misogynist with a disturbingly obvious lech for Pepper. In the ring,” Natasha replied.

Steve was looking back at his food, back to the rest of them, now all assembled on stools, Natasha in the center.

“He’s in the hospital. In a coma. There was some kind of bomb, a suicide bomber, they think...”

Natasha felt her teeth clamp down.

“Shit,” said Clint.

“It sounds like it’s that Mandarin, maybe,” Steve said. “The one who keeps hijacking the airwaves? It doesn’t sound like Happy was the target; he just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.”

Natasha sucked air in through her teeth. She pressed her palm into her knee, rolling the heel back and forth against it.

Bruce put a hand to her arm, tweaked her elbow lightly, dropped the hand.

“I asked Fury about that yesterday,” Natasha replied. “He told me the Feds didn’t want SHIELD on the case.”

“I called Stark,” said Steve. “His computer butler gets more distressed every time I call. I mean. I know it’s a computer and can’t really be distressed, but...he’s not answering.”

“Well, what are the Feds going to do if we just go after this guy?” Steve asked with a grumble. He threw some spinach in with the onions, turn the heat down, put a lid on the pan. “He’s hurting helpless people. He killed women and children in Kuwait. You expect me to just sit here?”

"Look, Cap," Clint said reasonably. "I know you're all Mr.-Behind-Enemy-Lines, but you're not just talking about sneaking off on a secret mission behind everyone's back. You're suggesting we directly countermand the most militaristic government in the world."

"We're not militaristic," Steve argued. "We-

"Yeah, tell that to the United States budget," Clint retorted. "I thought you got this, Cap, after all the SHIELD bullshit."

"SHIELD is technically an international organization," Steve replied. "And my point is that militaristic isn't synonymous with a large military. Look at-- which Korea is it? North. North Korea. That's militaristic."

Clint snorted. "Look, Steve, I don't care who it is, technically. They know about this guy. They probably have someone on it who is both less skilled and less prone to massive damage, and we don't want to fuck with their maneuvers or we'll get fucked forty ways to Wednesday."

"Well, when this guy hijacks the airwaves again and decides to murder somebody on national television, don't look at me," Steve answered grumpily as he threw six skirt steaks in a pan. "I hope you're all hungry."

"Famished," Bruce lied.
Pissing Match With A Terrorist

The next day, Tony Stark gave out his address on national television.

Natasha locked herself up, stayed in her room, didn't answer the barrage of phone calls making her phone blast music like a juke box.

She finally put it on silent.

She only dialed out once.

"Director," she said urgently, when Fury answered the phone. "Send me to Malibu. We need someone on Stark."

"We already discussed this, Widow," he said. "It's not our gig."

"It's of interest to SHIELD. To the Initiative."

"Stark quit the Initiative," Fury replied.

"Oh, because he told Cap he quit in a fit of pique and ran back to California? You know as well as I do that all we need to do to bring him back into the fold is float something interesting enough his way."

"Fine, let me put it this way," Fury replied. "I am not risking my most valuable agent because Tony Stark decided to get into a pissing match with a terrorist."

"Were you able to get him the intel about that lab, at least?" Natasha asked.

"Do you think he's taking my calls, either? I sent him the files. No word."

Natasha sighed.

"Tell me if you change your mind, Sir."

"I always do."
Around about noon, JARVIS addressed her, while she lay on her sofa plowing through the work of John Bellairs.

"Agent Romanova? Doctor Banner asked me to request your presence in the lab."

She groaned. "Tell him I need a few minutes to shower and put on pants," she said.

"I'm sure he'll be most gratified to hear it," replied JARVIS.

Natasha wasn't sure if the computer's innuendo was something Stark had programmed in or not. She snorted, and went to shower.

"What is it?" she asked, sidling through the lab doors before they were fully open.

Bruce was sitting on the sofa, a bowl in his lap, a spoon in one hand. He looked up at her, smiled, and then removed his glasses and polished them with his handkerchief, looking down at the glasses, not at her.

"You, ah, you need to eat," he said. "There's tomato soup."

She sat down beside him, reached for the bowl he'd laid out in wait for her (covered with a plate to stay warm), pulled it into her lap, where the heat from the ceramic seeped through her jeans. After a moment, she discarded her spoon and brought the bowl up to her lips, shutting her eyes as she let the steam play over her face.

"Thank you," she answered, only after she'd taken a long slurp from the bowl.

"I take it Fury won't let you go?" Bruce asked.

"He's right," Natasha answered. "Stark can't compromise the rest of us just because he's a loose cannon. He's not thinking about us; he's not thinking about whether we'll show. He's not making a calculated play. He's thinking about revenge."

"Hm," Bruce answered. "Well, to be fair, we are the Avengers."

"We?" Natasha asked. She set her soup bowl, half-drained, down, and wiped her mouth with the back of her hand, licking her lips to taste the last of the salt and basil. "It's 'we' today?"

"It's always 'we,' Bruce answered, 'even when I'm not particularly enthused by the prospect."

His spoon clattered in his own bowl, and he put it aside. "Natasha," he said, his tone gentler, the corners of his eyes creasing in concern. "I know you've been charged with keeping me here."

Natasha sighed. "I wouldn't stop you from leaving," she replied. "Is this the conversation you want to have today? Is it Stark? Is it that sense of everyone knowing who you are and what you're about, where you live...how to..."

"No," Bruce answered. "Although I've been thinking that if I only had a way to get there, I'd go after Stark. I could do it. Who would stop me?"

Natasha laughed, but her voice was dry, hollow; it sounded thin. "Fury would eat me alive if I let you go. And Dayton is one thing, but do you think you could handle a commercial flight that
"I wouldn't risk it, and anything else takes days. Natasha." He said her name slowly, lingering on the second vowel. "Tony's going to be fine. He's got the suit. He shouldn't have done something so idiotic; we all know that, but--"

"It's not Stark I'm worried about," Natasha replied. "It's Pepper."
Fury sent the four of them-- all four, for the first time since New York-- out together that evening.

It was another retrieval mission, more experimental weapons that had been lost during the helicarrier attack, the kind of thing that didn't require such a large team, but Natasha knew Fury's intent was twofold: one, to get the group of them working as a team again, get used to the dynamics, let Steve lead in a low-risk environment, ease him back into his role; and two, to get their minds off the fact that they weren't in California and weren't being given leave to deal with the Mandarin.

The weapons were on a farm in Pennsylvania.

The people holding them filled Natasha with a sense of pity-- a group of farmers, untrusting of the government, preparing for doomsday scenarios-- and irony, in that she knew they were at least partly right. They weren't prepared for any single one of them: a trained assassin, a sniper, a super soldier. The three together were almost too much, fighting a group of poorly-dressed men and women with shotguns and hunting bows, some homemade explosives, a baby howling through the chaos of it all.

Natasha had the crosshairs of her pistol on the shoulder of the man who appeared to be the ringleader when Steve issued orders over the comm line.

"Hawkeye, take out the leader--wound, don't kill."

She smiled to herself as Clint took the shot. The man fell back so quickly that his compatriots blanched.

"Drop your weapons," Steve called to the farmers, his voice ringing like a bell in the cold air.

They followed his order, to a man.

"Banner?" Steve asked, hesitantly. "Our targets have a man down. Arrow wound to the shoulder. We need you."

"Be there in five," Bruce replied.

Steve glanced up, into the darkness, and frowned. "And something for a colicky baby," he added.

Bruce treated the man: extracted the arrow, cleaned the wound thoroughly, dressed it with Natasha standing guard, while Steve called SHIELD for a medical transport and went with Clint to the nearest late-night grocery store and bought a week's worth of food. Fresh food, milk in jugs instead of packets of powder, leafy vegetables instead of metal cans.

When he’d finished with the wounded man, Bruce asked for the baby. Its mother looked stunned, eyes wide in her drawn, underfed face, and scurried inside, returning with the infant.

Natasha kept her eyes on the residents of the compound, who stood about, uneasy, in a circle, listening to them whisper amongst themselves. Their postures had relaxed; their eyes were bright. She realized they were looking on more with eagerness than with fear.

She lowered her gun, lowered her gaze. She heard a collective sigh of relief as she sat down beside Bruce, put a hand to his arm.
“It’s nothing serious,” Bruce assured her. ‘Kid’s going to be fine; I’ll give them something for the cough.”

He brought the child back to its mother, dispensing a small bottle to her, directing her quietly.

By the time he was finished, three more people had brought children out, tentatively, holding them by the hand.

Bruce took a breath. “All right,” he said, running a hand through his hair. “Youngest to oldest. Widow, I need--”

“Yes, Doc?” she asked, coming back to stand nearby.

“Just stay close,” he said quietly. “In case.”

She knelt beside him, listened to him chat amiably with the children as he worked, checked their ears, their eyes, their chests with such a calm, friendly demeanor that none of them seemed scared after the first minute.

By the time Steve and Clint returned, he had given physicals to six children, put a splint on a sprained finger, given a woman an ointment for a rash, and recommended that one other man go to the hospital along with the wounded leader. “I don’t think its serious,” he assured the man. “But you’re going to need an X-ray of your lungs, alright? Give them this piece of paper,” he said, scrawling a few things down.

The man eyed him warily. “How am I supposed to pay for it?”

“Don’t worry,” Bruce replied. “We have a friend who can pay for it.”
As soon as the medevac arrived, they piled back into the truck and Bruce pulled out his phone. He frowned at it for a moment, then dialed.

“Tony, it’s me,” he said, in the sort of matter-of-fact tone people reserve for voicemails. “There’s two men on their way to Muncy Valley Hospital in Muncy, Pennsylvania; we need somebody to cover their bills. It’s critical access, so you might want to buy them a couple machines if you can. Just...get back to me and let me know when you hear from them? Thanks.”

He hung up, and looked back at his phone, brow creasing as he inspected the screen.

“What is it?” Natasha asked.

“Pepper called. Six times.”

Natasha pulled out her own phone, silenced for the duration of the mission.

Four calls from Pepper. None from Stark. She felt her chest go tight. She dialed Pepper’s number. Voicemail.

“This is Legal,” was all she said. “Call back.”

Bruce gave her a questioning look as she hung up. She shrugged, and shifted her position so that her knee bumped up against his. He tilted his head, gave her a sidelong look, and smiled as he stuffed his hands into his coat pockets.

“You all done with your calls back there?” Steve asked, hand hovering over the radio dial. “I’m going to...find some...you know, something Christmassy.”

He hesitated. “If that’s alright.”

“Yeah,” said Clint, “Go for it. Oh, shit, Steve, has anybody played ‘Grandma Got Run Over By A Reindeer’ for you yet?”

“Grandma got what?”

Steve flipped the radio on, started dialing through channels, music and static blending together.

“Run over by a reindeer. Walking home from our house Christmas Eve,” Clint sang.

“That’s a terrible song,” said Steve.

“You can say you don’t believe in Santaaaaaaaa--”

“Presumed dead after an air attack on his Malibu--” said a radio announcer, as Steve flipped through the channels, sandwiched between an ad for Quiznos and Adele singing about setting fire to the rain on a hits of 2012 countdown.

“Steve?” Natasha said. “Switch back to--”

But he’d had the same thought, clearly, and was already flipping the dial back, in time to hear the announcer say, “Potts, who was seen fleeing the house with an unidentified female, white, mid-thirties, with brown hair, has not been heard from since the attack.”
Clint swore, pulled the truck over, his steering jerky.

Natasha felt her back constrict, her shoulders go tense, her forearms and neck go cold. She pressed her knee closer to Bruce’s, slipped her hand into his pocket to find his fingers and twine her own with them.

He folded his hand around hers, pressing it firmly. His own fingers were dry, chapped from working in the cold, but warm, and he tugged her hand deeper into his pocket, until it was fully enveloped in wool, satin lining, and skin.

Steve was swearing under his breath, dialing through channels with a fevered pace, trying to find one that would be beginning the story, while Clint brought up Twitter on his phone.

"Fuck," said Clint. "It's fucking--He fucking crashed Twitter," Clint said, as he switched to Facebook.


Bruce checked his watch.

Natasha squeezed his hand a little more tightly.

"Can you pull up a full article?" Bruce asked. "From somewhere half-credible?"

"Yeah, I've got Al-Jazeera," Clint replied. "There's video. Fucktons of video; every news agency in the world was already hanging out at Shellhead's house. Okay, this..."

The sounds of explosions, crashing, roaring flames emanated from Clint's phone.

"Looks bad."

Steve unbuckled his belt, flung open his car door, stumbled out and stood, panting, in the scrub at the side of the rode.

Clint sighed. "Steve, come on. Get back in the car, we'll find a truck stop or something."

Steve was sucking in his breath in big, hasty gulps, ragged, his forearms pressed tight against his abdomen.

"Can't," he managed.

"Steve, for fuck's sake, it's freezing."

Steve's shoulders rolled forward as if he'd been wounded "I can't," he snapped, turning back to face them.

Bruce slid his hand from Natasha's, exited the car.

Natasha shivered when the car door opened, blasting her with the cold air from outdoors.

She rolled forward, lashed her arms around Clint, and kissed his cheek. "It's nothing you did," she said softly.

"I know," Clint replied. "But he doesn't even like Stark," he said, grumbling as he slumped down in the driver's seat.
“Give me a minute,” she said. “Just a minute.”

She ducked out of the truck, stepped up to where Bruce was standing with a hand on Steve’s arm, and sidled up to Steve, hooking her own arm through his, pressing her cheek to his shoulder. He looked down at her, sucked in a breath.

“Sorry,” he said. His voice was constricted; his pulse was racing. “I had to...I don’t know. I thought I was going to have an attack, and--”

“An attack?” Natasha asked. “Steve, I thought you didn’t have asthma anymore.”

“I don’t,” he added, kicking at an empty plastic cup on the ground, eyes downward. “It just felt like--”

“It’s panic,” Bruce answered. He patted Steve’s back, brushing at the younger man’s jacket with his mitten hand. “Tight chest, short breaths?”

“Yeah,” Steve answered. He sucked in a breath, put one hand to his forehead. “Something like that, yeah. I...Sorry.”

“It happens to the best of us,” Bruce replied. He glanced in Natasha’s direction, raising an eyebrow. She nodded back, her expression controlled.

“It doesn’t happen to you,” Steve said. “You have everything under control.”

Bruce smiled, and looked down, toward the car, away from both of them. “I wasn’t talking about me,” he replied. “I’m not the best of us. You, look, you feeling better, Cap?”

“Yeah, I-- yeah,” Steve replied.

“Good, because I think Clint’s about to leave without us if we take any longer. Come here,” Natasha said, tugging at the sleeve of Steve's too-thin jacket. "Sit in the back with me. Doc'll navigate."

She traded a glance with Bruce as she climbed back into the truck, towing Steve along by the arm.

Steve seemed listless: his skin was pallid; his jaw, slack. Natasha reached for him by the shoulders, pulled him--what would fit of him--toward her until his head was resting in her lap. She stroked his back with one hand, sliding her fingers up beneath his jacket once he’d stopped tensing at every touch. She stroked his hair with the other. She could still feel his shoulders jerk, now and again, followed by a slow, deep breath each time.

"Better?” she murmured.

He nodded into her knee.
Clint turned the truck into the first motel they passed, went up to the front desk, flashed a badge, and came back with key cards for two rooms. He handed them off to Natasha. “Gonna go pick up some beer,” he said. “And food. We could use that, too. Any preferences?” he asked.

She shook her head. “Just ice cream for Cap,” she replied.

Natasha half-nudged Steve (who was toting the crate of weapons) into one of the rooms, Bruce following them in with a few bottles of water from the vending machine that flickered on and off on the balcony outside their room. The motel seemed mostly deserted, a bit shabby, but acceptably clean.

Once he passed the threshold, Steve stalked forward, dropped the crate at the door, and made a beeline for the television set. Natasha caught his hand just before he reached the power switch.

“No,” she said. “We’re not doing that.”

“But--” Steve said, eyes fixed on the black screen as if he could see a picture there, if he stared hard enough.

“You’re not doing that to yourself,” she said. She gestured to Bruce, reached for one of the bottles of water, and handed it to Steve. “You take that. Drink it. Go take a shower. And then when you’re done, maybe we’ll turn on the television. And watch some mindless pay-per-view kiddie movie, but we’re not watching the news. Not tonight.”

Steve tensed, squared his shoulders, and for a moment, she thought he would argue, but instead, he opened the water, downed all sixteen ounces in one go, and crushed the bottle with his hand.

He handed it back to her, the hollow, deformed plastic carcass, and she dropped it into the wastebasket as Steve, with one more reluctant look at the television, moved toward the bathroom.

Natasha and Bruce stood in the middle of the room, not quite meeting each other’s eyes, for a moment, before Natasha removed her coat and tossed it on the chair nearest the door. Bruce put down the remaining water bottles and followed suit, dropping to sit at the foot of one of the beds.

She sat down beside him, handed him the key card. “You and Steve stay here,” she said. “I’ll take the other one with Clint.”

He nodded and pocketed the card, took off his glasses, rubbed at the bridge of his nose. “You don’t think he’s dead, either, do you?” he asked her quietly.

“I don’t think anything until there’s evidence,” Natasha replied. “I need to call in to Fury, but I can’t do it if Cap can hear. I don’t--”

“I know,” Bruce said.

She rubbed at her face and began unlacing her boots. “You did good, Doc,” she said.

“Thank you,” he murmured.

“Don’t thank me,” she said. She stripped down to her undershirt, leggings, socks, and stacked the rest of her clothing in a neatly-folded pile, then sat with her legs crossed and stretched her arms up, arching her back until her shoulders cracked of their own accord. “You’re the reason those people
trusted us. We didn’t just do our job, we did something to help.”

“Well,” Bruce said. “People like that do the things they do because they’ve been hurt. They’re not going to trust bullies; they’re going to trust doctors. Maybe. Not always.”

He turned to her, looked her over. “You’re alright?”

She ran her fingers through her hair, caught it at the base of her neck and tied it up into a ponytail. “Worried,” she said. “But I’ll hold up.”

She reached for her phone, checked it—no new calls. She tried Pepper again; the call was sent directly to voicemail.

So she sat, in silence, looking at the home screen of her phone, ankles crossed and dangling off the bed.

Bruce leaned back, hands flat on the ugly green-and-brown motel bedspread, resting his weight on his palms, his glasses hooked over his thigh. “We should put a movie on,” he said. “Before Steve gets out of the shower and tries to turn on the news again.”

Natasha flipped through the offerings: Iron Sky had ‘Iron’ in the title, so that was out. Men in Black III had time travel. Probably a bad idea. Beasts of the Southern Wild sounded depressing. One of the actors in Snow White and the Huntsman looked creepily like Thor. She settled on Brave just as she heard the water in the bathroom stop running.

“Disney?” Bruce asked curiously.

“It’s about an archer,” Natasha replied. “Clint’ll be happy.”

Steve, still drippy, still a little twitchy, emerged from the bathroom, wearing the pants from his uniform and his undershirt. They hadn’t expected to stay overnight; none of them had spare clothes. He brushed at his hair with a towel; it fluffed around his head like a downy chick.

“Better?” Natasha asked, barely paying attention to the movie as Steve plopped down on the bed, sitting squarely on the bottom corner, on Natasha’s other side.

“I don’t know,” he admitted.

She paused the movie, before the opening credits were complete.

“Steve. Talk.”

Steve’s hands shaped into fists; he ground them into his thighs. “The last thing I said to him was that I didn’t need him,” he said with a growl. “We fought. He quit. That was my—”

“Steve,” Natasha said gently. “His quitting or remaining on the team had nothing to do with you.”

Bruce cleared his throat. “And we all know it was just hot air, anyhow,” he added.

“I shouldn’t have said it,” Steve answered, swallowing hard. “It was out of line, no matter what the circumstances. This just makes it worse.” His voice was even but quiet.

Natasha put a hand to the square of his back. “Remember what you said. Presumed. Don’t let yourself—wait until we know for sure.”

Steve shrugged. “Doesn’t make what I said acceptable. Doesn’t make it alright that I didn’t
Steve shrugged. "Doesn't make what I said acceptable. Doesn't make it alright that I didn't apologize."

"For fuck's sake," Clint said, as he dropped a pile of paper sacks to the floor. "Steve. You got into a fight with Stark. You want to guess what fraction of people's last words on this earth to Tony Fucking Stark were probably fighting words? Probably like nine-tenths, or something. Something really high. That has nothing to do with you."

He tossed one of the sacks to Steve.

"Ice cream."

One was placed in Bruce's lap.

"Beer."

Bruce pulled out his keys and started popping open bottles.

The third sack went in Natasha's lap, the brightly-colored logo printed on its surface making its provenance evident.

"Burger King," Clint said, in case it wasn't obvious.

He opened the fourth sack, also from Burger King, pulling out a large soda for Steve and a large coffee for himself.

"Doc," he said to Bruce. "I got enough for you, but I wasn't sure if you ate any of this shit."

"I'll eat anything," Bruce assured him, as Natasha lay the contents of her sack on the floor. He hovered, leaning, before taking a box of chicken nuggets. "I just don't make a habit of it."

Natasha, for her part, grabbed a bacon cheeseburger and a carton of fries, arranging herself, seated, on the floor as if it were a picnic. After a moment, Steve and Clint joined her. Bruce remained on the bed, sitting perched above the other three, chicken in one hand and beer in the other.

"I was gonna get us all kids' meals," Clint said. "But the toys were Iron Man. Super tasteful, right."

Steve glared at him.

"Jesus, fuck, I'm just trying to take some of the edge off," Clint said, ruffling his own hair. He gave Natasha an uneasy look, then stuffed his mouth with burger before he could put more feet in it.

Natasha reached for the remote, put the movie back on so that none of them would have to talk to each other. She finished eating first, cleaned up her trash, and climbed up on the bed.

Bruce had scooted back, and was leaning against the headboard, reading MFK Fisher's *The Art of Eating*, which she had thought was a fair trade for *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*. She had no idea how he could focus on a book with the television blaring, but there he was. She stayed at the foot of the bed, curling up in a ball, one leg dangling off the edge, and watched Merida accidentally turn her mother into a bear before dozing off.

“She looks like you,” Clint said, and she snapped back to wakefulness, as he finished scarfing the last of the fries. He bounced to his feet, clambered up beside her, and she leaned back against him.
“She shoots like you,” Natasha replied. Clint looped her hair around his fingers. “We should go to bed,” she said.

“Och, Mum,” Clint implored.

“Turn me into a bear and I’ll maul you,” she said, deadpan, face completely devoid of expression.

“But I don’t want to get married!” Clint answered, his fake accent sounding something more like Lucky the Leprechaun than a Scotsman. “I want to be free like Braveheart!”

“I want to be asleep like a rock,” Natasha said, and she got to her feet, gathering her clothes from the floor.

Steve started, glanced up at Natasha, and then Clint, who followed her up with a stretch. He jabbed his spoon back into his ice cream and got to his feet, his lips parted as if he were about to speak, but he didn’t say anything.

“Are you alright, Steve?” Bruce asked, looking up from his book.

“I--” He took a breath, straightened up. “Of course,” he said. “Just--” He looked from Natasha to Clint, then back, chewing on his lower lip.

Natasha tossed her things on the second bed. “There are two beds,” she said. “Clint, we’re bunking up.”

She brushed her teeth, used the toilet, and stripped down to her underwear, and if Bruce didn’t look at her, or Steve didn’t look away, she didn’t remark on it, but climbed in between the white, too-starchy motel sheets. Clint did the same, crawled in beside her, slung his arms around her waist, kissed the back of her shoulder. She brought one of his hands to her lips, kissed his knuckles in return.

Lights on, television on: none of it mattered. Natasha fell asleep, though her dreams involved Tony Stark being turned into a bear.
She woke in the middle of the night: the hotel room was bathed in shadows, the movie clearly long over. Bruce's glasses rested on the nightstand; he was snoring softly in the bed across from her.

Steve was--

Not in the room.

But his jacket was.

She slid herself out of Clint's arms and pulled the comforter off the bed, wrapping herself up until she looked like an ugly hotel-room mummy.

She shoved her feet into Clint's boots, braced herself, praying that it wouldn’t be too cold in her makeshift clothing.

She shivered as she stepped outdoors, saw the tall silhouette well down the end of the long shared balcony of the second floor of the motor inn. She waved, and walked forward, drawing her shoulder tight to herself with the cold, her breath fogging in small puffs ahead of her.

Steve wasn’t looking at first. She deliberately stepped more loudly-- even in Clint’s boots, her tendency to walk quietly was ingrained; she had to choose to make herself heard.

He turned, startled, his hands tightening on the railing.

“Steve,” she said.

He looked at her, swallowed, stepped back, then really looked at her, looked her over from head to toe. “Aren’t you freezing?” he asked.

“Of course I’m freezing,” Natasha answered. “But you shouldn’t be alone.”

She tugged the comforter more tightly around herself. He stood, arms slack at his sides, and watched.

“Can’t sleep,” he replied. “Don’t have to.”

She raised an eyebrow. “Nightmares?”

He winced. “They’d been getting better,” he said, and he drew a thumb up to his brow, flicking a stray lock of hair back. “Since--”

“We all have them,” she said. “It’s nothing to be ashamed of. Come on back inside; we should stick together right now.”

“I don’t think I--”

But she slid her hand into his much larger one, tugged, nodded toward the door. “Sleep with me and Clint,” she said. “It’ll be fine.”

“With--?” Steve stopped where he was, almost as soon as she’d coaxed him forward.

“What?” She tilted her head, crossed her arms over her comforter-dress. “Steve. You were in the
Army.”

Steve was staring at the comforter, his cheeks a high pink that wasn’t entirely a result of the cold. “It’s not the same.”

She rolled her eyes. “We keep working together, it's going to keep happening, Cap. You might as well get it out of your system now. I've seen the way you look at me, and--”

"Widow, I don't think-- I mean--" Steve gulped, reached for the railing, his fingers slamming it too hard, fumbling for purchase, and he grimaced. "I'm your team leader. I would never--"

Natasha reached for his hand, peeled his fingers away one by one, put them into her own. "We're teammates," she agreed. She stood on tiptoe, kissed his cheek, and all he did was stare at her. "And you're still too young for me. Let me finish my sentence. I've seen the way you look at me, and I've seen you look at men the same way--"

"I don't--" Steve's voice came out rough, reedy.

"Yes, you do," Natasha answered. "My point is, there’s no difference. We're teammates. Don't be afraid to ask for what you need. Unless you want me to wake up the Doc and ask him to lay his head on yo--"

"No," Steve said, strangled. "I...I mean..."

He looked down, away. "I don't think it's a good idea. I can manage alright. But thank you for the offer."

She laughed. "It's nothing. You look like you could use a hug."

"A--"

She embraced him, tightly. He was as stiff as a starched collar, all but his feet, which shuffled where he stood, as if they were trying to get away.

"I want to find those bastards," he said quietly. "I want to find those bastards and give them hell."

"I know," Natasha replied. "And that's why we have to sleep."

Natasha nodded for him to follow, and he did, still shuffling his feet, looking over his shoulder every now and again.

When she got to the door, he sucked in his breath, frowning at the door. She pulled out her key card. "Were you not expecting to come back in?" she asked.

"I forgot," he admitted, shoving his hands into his pockets.

She patted his arm, opened the door, and climbed back into bed.

Clint grunted at her as she lay the now-cold comforter back over them both.

"Fucking freezing," he said, squirming as he wrapped his arms back around her.

"Had to run an exfiltration," Natasha answered, snuggling in close, butting her chin against his chest.

"Ha," he said. "Go to sleep."
Twenty minutes later, she heard footsteps behind her, and turned her head to see Steve, looking down at her, a pillow in one hand, tilting his head back and forth, his lips pressed tightly together.

"Sorry," he said, quietly. "I mean, can I--?"

He gestured at the bed.

"Yeah," she said. "Of course." She wriggled over to make room, with only minimal grumbling from Clint.

Fortunately, supersoldiers apparently ran warm.

That was how, on the morning before Christmas Eve, the remaining Avengers found themselves in a motel room in Pennsylvania, three of the four of them in one bed, and the fourth terribly amused and taking photos on his phone while the others were still waking up.

Clint scowled, rubbing his eyes in the early morning light as her pushed himself to a sitting position. "Doc, you are not--"

Bruce shrugged and slipped his phone into his pocket. "I might need to blackmail you all later," he said. "Who knows?"

Natasha grinned and scooted past Clint for the shower. "Actually, blow up one and make me a print, could you, Doc?" she asked cheerily. "That can be my Christmas present."
They rode back in near-silence; Natasha drove, Bruce sat in the front, Clint and Steve were ensconced in the back. Bruce found a station on the radio that was playing Gershwin, and left it there through Rhapsody in Blue, An American in Paris, The Grand Canyon Suite in its entirety. The traffic became congested later in the morning, as they neared New York, the road packed with people traveling for the holiday.

There was a throng outside the Tower. Natasha swallowed as they passed the main entrance to the building, rounding the corner toward the freight entrance and the garage.

Columbus Circle was full of people, some in Iron Man shirts or hats, a few even in costume. People flying flags, people holding posters and enlarged photos of Tony Stark. People holding stubs of candles, clearly out in front of the Tower all night.

There was a smaller crowd of protesters on one side, cordoned off, with a police escort, repeating chants questioning the private ownership of the Iron Man suit, the safety of the Arc Reactor, Stark Industries’ business practices.

And then there were the flowers.
Flowers.
Mountains of flowers. Pink and white and yellow and red, carnations and roses and lilies and chrysanthemum, in bouquets and piles, with bows and lace and gauze, ferns and baby’s breath, scattered here and there with Iron Man toys, action figures, balloons.

Natasha could just make out piles of white rose petals, nearly filling the center of the Circle.

Natasha clenched her jaw. She heard Steve suck in his breath, in the back seat.

“Sweet and Lowdown” on the radio seemed terribly dissonant.
Natasha took another shower when she got into her suite, turning the water pressure and the heat up as high as they could go, until it felt as if she were scalding off the outer layer of her skin.

She lathered her hair until her fingers met with friction when she ran them over her scalp, rinsed thoroughly, shaved every errant hair she could find, scrubbed her face until it was raw and pink, and stepped out, wrapping herself in a huge, fluffy towel.

“Agent Romanova,” said JARVIS politely, as she brushed her teeth, scrubbing at them until her gums bled, “Doctor Banner was up to see you; I told him you were occupied.”

She spat toothpaste tinged with blood into the sink, reached for her deodorant. “Tell him I’ll be right dow--”

“He’s waiting outside for you.”

She didn’t bother with underwear. She threw on a tee shirt and sweatpants, wrung her wet hair out in the sink. “Let him in,” she said, and reached for the bathroom door.

He stood in the doorway, with a book in one hand and two beers in the other. “I thought it was too early for wine,” he said, holding them up.

She grinned. "Wine would just put me right back to sleep," she said, accepting one of the bottles.

She backed into the room to let him in. "But we're doing this now?" she asked, walking to the kitchenette to retrieve a bottle opener. "We didn't have any difficult green visitors."

Bruce shrugged, ambled over toward the wide windows in Natasha's living room that looked over Columbus Circle. "I saw how you handled Steve," he said. "I thought maybe you needed it."

He handed the bottles to her; she popped the tops off.

"Sort of tastes like Christmas," Natasha mused.

"I had been planning on going to Ohio," Bruce said. He rested his beer on the long windowsill, pressed his hands against it, leaned back against the glass.

"I haven't spent Christmas with the family in years. But now I..."

Natasha took a swig of beer, and slid a hand over to cover one of his. "Go," she said. "See your family. The rest of us...we don't have family; you should spend time with yours when you can."

"It's not exactly the most normal family Christmas," Bruce said, "going to the psychiatric prison and seeing if Dad is verbal today. You'll be alright here?"

"I'll be fine," Natasha replied. "I've been through worse, and Christmas isn't-- my first Christmas, I was already an adult, drunk off my ass on absinthe in Prague, and Clint gave me a necklace, and I didn't know what to do with it, because I hadn't thought to get him anything. I--I knew it was Christmas, conceptually, but Christmas had always been for other people. It doesn't matter that much to me."
Bruce slid his fingers through hers. "It's Steve's first," he said. "Out of the ice, I mean. If you want--"

She shook her head, stepped up on her tiptoes, kissed his cheek. "Do what you need," she said. "If you're looking for permission to go, you have it. If you want an excuse to stay, I can be your excuse."

"I was wondering if you'd like to come," Bruce replied.

She winced, inwardly, and hoped it didn't show on her face. "I can't, Bruce. You know I can't."

She dropped his hand, and turned toward the window, and then she stopped, looking out at the Circle, and swallowed, and reached for his hand again.

The white rose petals in the center of the circle had been patterned, in piles, to mimic the design of Tony's arc reactor, glowing softly against the stone.

He turned, too, and gave her hand a squeeze when he saw it.

"That's why I can't," she said.

"I worry about you," he said.

"Don't," Natasha replied. "I'll probably wind up sandwiched on the couch between a gorgeous archer and an even more gorgeous supersoldier. There are a million girls in New York who'd trade places with me in an instant."

"And just as many boys," Bruce retorted. "Should we-- should we do Christmas now, then? Or after?"

"I didn't get you anything," Natasha said. "I intended to get you something; it's nothing like that. But we found out about the Mandarin when I was out shopping, and you know how the rest of the week has gone. I don't think I'll have time."

"Let me cook you dinner," Bruce replied.

"Whose gift is that?" she asked.

"Yours to me."

"That hardly seems fair," she told him.

"Well, it's not," Bruce answered. "It's much nicer than what I got you." He held out a thin, white paperback, with a childlike illustration on the cover.

"Le Petit Prince?" she read.

"Yeah," Bruce said. "French philosophy you might actually like."

After he left, his departure punctuated by an embrace that Natasha couldn’t quite bring herself to break off, she stood at the window and watched the arc reactor blow away, its edges bleeding until it was no longer a discrete image, and then until it was nothing at all.

And then Natasha realized she’d finally lost count of how many times she’d been alone with him.
Clint came in not long after Bruce left, also freshly-showered, hair still damp, skin still pink, shirt tossed over his shoulder. “Nat,” he said, dropping onto her sofa. “Somebody’s got to take those weapons in.”

“You want me to go?” Natasha asked. “Or am I staying home with Steve?”

“I need you to look at them,” Clint answered. “I don’t--” He spied Bruce’s still-half-full beer on the windowsill, reached for it, sucked the rest of it down, dropped the bottle to the floor. “Fuck, Nat, I don’t-- I’ve got a specific set of skills, right? I’m an assassin. I’m not good at all this--”

He stopped speaking, bowed his head, rubbed his temples with his fingers.

“All this what?” Natasha sat down beside him, put a hand to his back.

“Stark would know what these were,” he said. “Phil would know what to do. I don’t-- you give me instructions, give me a target, I aim, right? Intrigue isn’t--”

There was a hitch in his voice. She slid closer, wove her arms around him. “Clint. What happened?”

Clint collapsed a little when she hugged him, but then she felt his shoulders draw taut. “That crate isn’t full of SHIELD property.”
“Widow,” Fury said, when she arrived at the drop location. “I was expecting Barton. You two give me all this talk about putting him back in the field, I give him an assignment, you--

Natasha kicked open the crate; pulled one of the guns from it, tapped the cephalopod-shaped insignia imprinted on the grip.

“These didn’t come from the helicarrier,” she said.

She held the gun out. "You're lucky Rogers wasn't there to see these," she said. "You're lucky he's too torn up over Stark's disappearance to be paying attention to anything."

"But I see you didn't see fit to tell him," Fury remarked, lifting the gun from her hand, running his own fingers over the tentacles stamped in steel, smooth and vivid in black-on-black relief.

"After the Phase Two debacle?" Natasha asked. "If he discovered we'd lied, it would take me months to get him back on track. You've seen his profile. He's a shit soldier. Doesn't listen to order, takes matters into his own hands, acts on gut and pride and morals like steel. He’s got the highest probability of going rogue of any soldier I've ever worked with. And he can't do that."

Fury nodded. "It would kill him."

Natasha nodded at the gun. "They would kill him, you mean."

She took a breath. "It needs to come from us. And it needs to sound like we've only just discovered they're back."

"But not now," Fury agreed. "I can try to insulate him. I'll take you off HYDRA-related details."

Natasha snorted. "But you put us on this one," she pointed out. "Knowing full well what it was."

Fury raised an eyebrow.

"You never get sick of testing me, do you?" She asked.

He shrugged. "No," he replied. "But this one wasn't for you. It was for Barton."

Natasha smiled. "I told you he was ready."

"I needed a second opinion," Fury replied. "Keep this quiet where Rogers is concerned, for now. I don't think he's entirely capable of dealing with the information without deciding to go on a one-man suicide mission."

"He does seem to be fond of those," Natasha agreed. "Don't put me in this position again, Sir. Under other circumstances, I might have to make a different call, and I don't know if I'll be able to keep him."

"You know I don't want that to happen, Widow."

Natasha flexed her fingers. "I assume as much, Sir."

"Keep it quiet for now. We'll wait until after this business with Stark shakes out, and see where we are."
"You have any news about Stark, Sir?" Natasha asked hopefully.

"You know we track the suit," Fury replied. "The trouble is, the suit's gone dark."

Natasha bit the tip of her tongue.

"But you wouldn't be tracking the suit if they'd found a body."

"Excellent deduction." Fury replied.

"I don't know how long I can keep my boys from going on a goddamned vigilante mission, Director," Natasha said.

"The Feds still don't want us on this one. It's Stark," Fury said. "I have a feeling we won't have to wait long for fireworks."

Natasha nodded. "I need to get back," she said. "Tell Clint he's been taken off probation."

Fury smiled. "Tell him Merry Christmas from me."

"Merry Christmas, Director."
Ho, ho, ho

Natasha, by executive decision, ordered that the three remaining Avengers piled onto her sofa to watch all of the Christmas specials that neither she nor Steve had ever seen. Clint narrated his choices: *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer, The Little Drummer Boy, It's Christmas, Charlie Brown!, The Life and Adventures of Santa Claus.* He was about to put on *Nestor, the Christmas Donkey,* when he frowned at Steve and decided to put on *A Muppet Christmas Carol* instead.

They ordered in tacos from Lime Jungle for lunch, while Steve boiled a huge pot of clam chowder for dinner, explaining that the old Italian ladies used to bring the chowder over to the orphanage on Christmas Eve. “Something about eating fish for the birth of Christ,” he explained. “There were always sardines, too.”

Natasha's plan worked as well as it could have; Steve fell asleep on the sofa, and she and Clint covered him with a blanket and turned off the television.

"Sometimes I think he might actually, actually be twelve," Clint said, crossing his arms over his chest as he watched the snoring super soldier. ‘Any news about Stark?’

She shook her head. “Same as yesterday. Neither confirm nor deny.”

Clint walked into her bedroom, unzipped his pants, kicked them onto the floor, peeled off his shirt, and dropped it on top of his pants, in a little pile of khaki and dingy white cotton on the middle of Natasha’s pearl-grey rug. “Do you think Fury’d tell you if he knew?”

Natasha followed him in. “Laundry in the hamper,” she reminded him, as she stripped her own clothing off and climbed into bed. “If he knew Stark was alive, yes. It would keep any of us from doing something rash.”

“Where ‘any of us' means Steve,” Clint agreed. He shook out one of Natasha’s pillows, punched it into shape, lay down beside her, facing her on his side.

“I don’t think he’d tell us if he knew he was dead,” Natasha said quietly. “Not until he had time to decide what to do about it.” She wriggled closer, tugged Clint’s arm out to use for a pillow. “He doesn’t want to tell Steve about the HYDRA complication, yet. Which is probably for the best. Steve needs to get his head together first. You’re off probation, by the way.”

“Ha,” said Clint.


“Well, that sounds ominous.”

“Ho, ho, ho.”
It's a tree, not a Chitauri invasion

It was far too early the next morning when, Natasha dragged herself out of bed, reluctant to leave her little cocoon of down comforter and still-snoozing Clint.

He blinked, reached for her when she climbed over, pulled her down against him, slid a finger along the narrow waistband of her underwear, pressed a thumb to her hipbone.

She leaned close, hooked her arms around his neck, kissed him softly on the mouth. "Merry Christmas," she said. "When was the last time we were in the same place for Christmas?"

"Two thousand eight," he answered. "Kilinochchi." He caught her cheeks with his warm, rough hands, fingers framing her face like a jewel setting, and he kissed her again. "God, Nat. It's been a shit year."

"I know," she said. She gave him one last kiss before she rolled off of him, off the bed, stretched her back and her arms. "I have to check on Steve," she said, shrugging her apology.

"Tell Steve to come to bed," Clint said with a smirk. "I haven't had a threesome with another dude in-"

Natasha threw a sock at him. "No traumatizing the Captain," she retorted.

"Traumatizing?" Clint asked, pushing himself up. "It would be the best Christmas present anybody's ever given the kid. His crush is so fucking obvious."

"That's why it would traumatize him," Natasha answered.

Armored in a pair of jeans and a sweater that was baggy enough to disguise the fact that she couldn't be bothered with a bra, she exited the bedroom to find Steve on the sofa, hugging a pillow and watching the credits of Nestor, the Christmas Donkey with a look of morbid fascination.

"That's supposed to be for kids?" He asked when he saw her.

His face was a little greyer than usual, his eyes a little more bloodshot.

"How are you?" Natasha asked. "Clint and I are both awake. I know it’s still dark out, but...Clint and I were talking about going to the Flame for brunch."

Steve straightened up, shook his head. "I don't suggest going out there."

“Outside?” Natasha asked.

“No,” Steve replied. He glared at the door “There”

“Agent Romanova,” said J.A.R.V.I.S.,”if I may interject, I believe the Captain is referring to the decorations that Mister Stark ordered for the common areas of your living quarters."

"Livin--"

"There's a tree," Steve supplied, his voice tense, strained. He glanced at the door as if he'd just
informed her that the living room was full of goblins. "And presents."

"JARVIS," Natasha said, moving toward the coffee table, picking up her laptop, connecting to the wifi. "JARVIS, can you get a location on Stark? Any of the suits?"

"I'm afraid my Malibu network was taken offline during the attack," JARVIS replied. "All of the suits are located in that vicinity with the exception of Mark forty-two, which went offline around the same time."

"Forty-two?" Steve asked, eyes wide. "He's actually built forty-two suits? How did he--"

Natasha sucked in a breath. "Was that the suit Stark was wearing when the house was attacked."

"Yes, Miss," answered the system. "It sustained heavy damage; I have been periodically scanning for a signal without luck."

Natasha sighed. "Let me know if the situation changes, will you, J?"

"Of course," said JARVIS. "It's my pleasure."

"Thank you." She looked at Steve, hunched over beside her, his head in his hands, and patted his back.

"Steve," she said. "Come on, Cap, it's a tree, not a Chitauri invasion."

He straightened up, gave her a dark look. "The last time I had presents under a Christmas tree, my mother died. She saved up to get me a real paint set, not just the same cardboard one with the little dots of dry watercolor I got every year. It was sitting there, wrapped, and I knew exactly what it was and it took all my resolve not to just go ahead and open it. And she died before I got to. I never even touched those paints. I couldn't look at them without seeing bloodstains on the wood floor."

Clint very unceremoniously plopped himself down in between them, dressed in boxers and an undershirt. "You know my parents died when I was a kid, too, right?"

"I've read your file," Steve answered.

"So fuck it," Clint said. "Your mother bought you a fucking present because she loved you. Stark- - I don't fucking know how that asshole's mind works, worked, I don't even know, but in spite of every shiteheaded thing he's done, if there's a pile of presents out there, I am going to open every one and relish it."

He grimaced, blinked, the tension sapping out of his body, and he looked at Natasha, dug his fingertips into his knees. "Sorry," he said. "A lot of people died this year; I sort of feel like if we're alive, we'd better do our fucking best to appreciate it."

Natasha draped an arm around him, then another, then gave him a tight hug.

Steve flinched, leaned back, away from the two of them, ran a hand through his hair. "Sorry," he said, his voice rough.

"No offense taken," Clint said. He got up from the sofa, walked across the room. "It's just, like, there's more than one way to deal with grief, and you might want to start picking the one that lets you enjoy gifts when somebody means well enough to give them to you."

He put a hand on the door. "Even when they're shitty gifts, like pajamas. Matching flannel plaid
pajamas, when certain people should know you hate flannel, because at least they're *trying*, even if you don't realize it at the time."

The door slid open.

"That's an incredibly specific example, Barton."

"Because it's a not-so-subtle dig at his ex-wife," Natasha explained.

She looked up at Clint, who was standing silently in the doorway.

"Fuck," he said, after a moment, and he backed, ever so slightly, away from the door. "This is too much."

Natasha stepped up beside him. The living area had been decorated from floor-to-ceiling, with evergreen garlands and red velvet ribbon, holly wreaths and tiny, twinkling white lights. There was a towering tree that shot up to the ceiling, decked out with red and gold glass globes, gold stars, a crystal sun sitting at its apex.

Beneath the tree, to all sides of the tree, were mountains of gifts wrapped in brightly-colored paper.

"I told you," Steve said. "I told you it was--"

Clint put his hands over his face. "I need to call her. I don't even know what time zone she's in. I don't-"

Natasha patted his shoulder. "She'll understand. We all always understand."

Clint grimaced. "Fucking Starky Claus."

He took a deep breath and stalked into the room. "I don't know about you, but I haven't had a fucking tree since my folks were alive, and I'm going to open some fucking presents. Who's making cocoa?"

Steve put the milk on to boil, and the three of them started hunting through the stacks of gifts, mugs of hot chocolate with tiny marshmallows in hand.

Natasha opened a shimmering green dress, a pair of boots made of gold leather so soft and buttery that she passed them around the circle for the men to pet them. A perfect, slender steel blade with a sheath that lay so flat and so comfortably along her spine that she could barely feel it. A string of gold-tinted pearls, much finer than any jewelry she owned, earrings to match, encircled with tiny chips of diamonds.

Clint grinned as he opened a pair of identical boots, dyed a rich oxblood, and waved them at the other two. There was a platinum watch, a new bow (collapsible, made of the lightest alloy Natasha had ever hefted). A lined denim jacket.

Steve sat, silently, on an ottoman, hunched over, a small, plain black box in his hand.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Rogers, open your gifts," Clint said, giving Steve a tired look as he pulled on his boots.

"There aren't any," Steve said quietly, as he wrapped his fist around the box.

"What?" Clint asked.
Natasha got to her feet, began trawling the stacks of gifts for ones with Steve's name.

"I looked, Widow," Steve said. "I looked; there's just one."

He held up the box. "I don't--"

"Steve?" Natasha asked.

"One," Steve repeated. "He went to all this work to..." His nostrils flared for a moment. "He was that angry with me. All these months later. Not that I need his charity." He straightened his shoulders, set his jaw, put down the box. "It's probably some note telling me that he thinks I'm an ass."

"And what if it is?" Clint asked. "Jesus, Steve, so burn it and be done with the guy. You're not going to be like this all fucking Christmas, are you?"

Steve gritted his teeth, opened the box.

True to Steve's prediction, it was a single piece of paper-- a note.

He read it and frowned, his brow creasing deeply.

"So does it say you're an asshole?" Clint asked.

Steve's hand dropped to one side, the note dangling.

"No," he said. "It says to go to the garage."
The elevators in Stark Tower were huge, lined in smooth, mirror-like black glass, with LCD screens built into the walls, playing a loop, today, a company-wide holiday, of flowing, abstract animations.

Natasha pushed the button. Steve stood far toward the back of the elevator, posture stiff, hands in the pockets of his jacket.

"You look like you're being led to slaughter," Natasha told him quietly, leaning against the back railing of the elevator, feeling the soft hum of the platform moving beneath her feet. "Steve. It's a Christmas present."

"From a dead man," Steve said grimly.

Natasha sighed, slipped her fingers into her pocket, let them curve around the form of her phone. "Presumed, Steve. Presumed dead."

"Since when are you an optimist?" Steve asked.

"Believe me, I wouldn't call the perspective that I can't believe anything without proof 'optimism,'" said Natasha.

"That's just show, you know?" Steve said quietly. "I know something about showmanship. That's your razzle-dazzle. It's just like Stark, only he uses--used-- his to burn bigger and brighter than everybody else, and you use yours to hide your glow."

"Well," Natasha said, though she smiled, "you know what they say about candles burning at both ends."

"That's not funny," said Steve.

They stepped out into the garage-- not the corporate garage, but Tony Stark's private garage, cavernous, dark, and more than a little chilly this time of year. The lights, on motion sensors, flicked on, blue-white, their hum echoing in the huge, still space.

The rows of cars were all lovingly covered in their owner's absence.

Behind her, Steve's footsteps silenced.

"They look like shrouds," he said.

She walked back to him, put a hand on his arm. "Do we know what we're looking for?" She asked.

"I don't know," Steve answered. "I've only driven cars a few times, and those were more military-regulation."

He started walking again, through the rows of parking spaces. "I don't see the need for cars in New York. I don't--"

And then he stopped, and raked his teeth over his lower lip. "Fuck," he said. "Fuck him. Fuck--"

Standing, gleaming in the lights at the end of the row of cars, was the most beautiful motorcycle
Natasha had ever seen-- simple and elegant, silver chrome and warm brown leather. It looked like something out of an old movie, a lone incandescent headlight, slender handlebars.

"It's lovely," Natasha said

"It's mine," Steve said, his voice rough, his throat closing with a choking sound at the end of the phrase. "It's..."

"Steve?"

"It's my bike," he said. "He--that--he had my--"

He walked over to it, stared, dropped to one knee, a hand on the seat, looking it over like he was inspecting a sick animal.

"Stark has a lot of resources, Steve. Maybe he--"

He ran a finger over one of the hub caps, stopping as he brushed a curve in the metal. "No," he said. "Look."

Natasha stepped forward, bent down, tipped her head so she could see what he was looking at: a few scratches in the finish, perfectly preserved: SR + PC.

"Don't tell me he recreated that," Steve said quietly.

His body was rigid; his eyes were bright.

"Are you..."

"You can go," Steve said, his finger pressing over the letters. "I'd sort of like a little time alone with her."

She reached out, pressed two fingers to his shoulder. "Let me know if you need me," she said.

He didn't answer, only nodded. She gave his shoulder a squeeze and left him there, looking back once before she stepped back onto the elevator.
"Alright" is relative.

Natasha went back upstairs; she and Clint put on *Love Actually* in true Christmas fashion, snuggled up on a sofa in the theater with a giant tin of caramel corn and two mugs of hot cocoa.

Clint was in the middle of singing "Christmas is All Around," attempting to upstage Bill Nighy and executing a very precarious stocking-footed spin on the floor, when the image froze on the screen and the audio cut out.

The sudden cessation of sound startled Clint, who bobbed mid-spin, and landed unceremoniously, face-first, in a pile of pillows.

"Oof," said Clint.

"Agent Romanova," JARVIS said. "I assumed that you would wish to be informed that a signal utilizing Sir's access code has been identified accessing the system."

Natasha shot up from her seat. "Stark?" she asked. "Where is he? What--"

Clint blinked, bleary-eyed, and pushed himself to his feet, wiping his mouth on his forearm. He dropped down beside her on the sofa with a rather loud thump.

"I'm afraid it's very faint, Agent, and connecting in extremely short bursts from a dynamic IP, so I have yet to trace the location. In all probability, the signal would be coming from the Mark 42 suit, or perhaps one of the suits entering distress mode at the Malibu site; however, I cannot ascertain whether Sir himself is responsible for or even present at the connection, but if it is making a connection at all, you may be able to communicate with the source of the connection."

Natasha's chest went tight. She took a deep breath. "Thank you, JARVIS. Do keep me informed?"

"Of course, Agent," JARVIS replied.

"And JARVIS?" she asked.

"Agent?"

"Please allow me to inform Captain Rogers?"

"Certainly," JARVIS replied. "I will let you know when he's returned to the Tower."

"Re-" Natasha nodded. "Of course."

Clint held a hand out in front of her as she put her phone away. She took it in both of hers, brought it close, kissed his fingertips, and he pressed the heel of his palm to her forehead, warmly, comfortingly.

"Steve's going to be fine," Clint assured her. "He's just going to ride around for hours, looking broody on his motorcycle like a bona fide superhero should."

"Don't say a thing about Stark to him," Natasha said, and she tipped her head up, looking Clint in the eye. "I'm afraid he'll do something stupid."

Clint groaned. "For two dudes who spend all their time at each other's throats, they're really
fucking too much alike. You think Stark's alright, then?"

"With Stark, 'alright' is relative," Natasha replied. "I don't think he's completely dead."

"Well, that's reassuring," Clint said, in a deadpan monotone.

She gripped his hand more tightly, used it to torque herself up to stand. "There's something I need to do," she said.

"Yeah, alright," Clint answered, running a hand through his hair so that it stood up, spiky, at odd ends. "You want me with you, or should I leave you alone?"

"Did you call Bobbi yet?" Natasha asked.

Clint grimaced. "Twice. She hasn't picked up, and I don't know if it's me, or--".

"It's probably just you," Natasha assured him, popping up on her toes to kiss his cheek. "You can be pretty insufferable."

"Ha," Clint replied. "Especially the last few months."

"Come on, then," Natasha said, and she dragged Clint by the hand, toward the stairs to the lab.

Natasha keyed in the passcode and opened the locked drawer beneath her desk, fishing out the phone Tony Stark had given her to test.

She plugged it into the wall, waited for it to build up enough charge that the screen winked on.

"JARVIS?" She asked, flicking on the wireless connection. "Can you find the prototype Mark Nine Stark gave me back in October?"

"Of course, Agent," the computer answered.

"Access location services," she instructed, and she left the phone on the desk. Clint followed her, cupped her shoulders in his hands, and she flexed them back toward him, her spine creaking audibly. He dug his fingers in, pressed with his thumbs, seeking out the source of the tension.

"Why are you locating your phone?" He asked. "Isn't that a little--"

"Stark and I traded phones," she reminded him.

"Well," Clint replied, as he rolled her shoulders back, letting out a satisfying crack. "He took yours."

"On purpose," she replied. "And gave me this one, which has a direct link to all of ours. JARVIS, can you find Stark?"

"Scanning for him, Agent," JARVIS replied.

"He...that's the most roundabout way of giving someone a tracking device I've ever--"

"He assumed I could figure it out, and he didn't want SHIELD to know," Natasha explained. "We're talking about Tony Stark; when is anything ever fucking simple?"

"He didn't tell you?" Clint asked. "He just assumed?"
"He assumed correctly," Natasha pointed out. "JARVIS, do you have a lock on that location?"

"The signal appears to be originating in -------, Tennessee."

"Tennessee?" Natasha asked.

"That's not too far," Clint said. "We could--"

"You're supposed to be the one I trust with these things," Natasha pointed out. "Don't make me demote you to Steve-level."

He thumped her arm. "I'm insulted. Horribly insulted; my ego will never recover."

"Good," said Natasha. "It needed to be taken down a peg." But she shifted on the sofa, rested her head on his chest.

"JARVIS," she said. "Dial?"

The room was filled with the electronic tone of a phone ringing.

"Good morning?" The voice that answered wasn't Stark, was much younger than Stark, sounded like a child. "This is, uh, Iron Man's skull? Who's calling, please?"

Clint snorted and covered his mouth with one hand, trying not to laugh when he knew JARVIS was transmitting all the sound in the room. "Who's--"

"My name is Natalie," Natasha answered. "What's your name?"

"Harley," said the child's voice. "Uh."

"How did you get the Iron Man suit, Harley?"

"Um. Mister Stark left it here. Look," said the boy. "How do I know you’re not a bad guy or something? I don’t even know if Natalie is your real name."

"I’m a friend," said Natasha.

"How do I know that?" asked Harley.

"I had the number for the suit," she pointed out.

"Hey," Clint muttered, cupping a hand close to Natasha’s ear. "He’s angling for your job."

"Harley, listen to me," Natasha said, in a warm voice. "Hang up the phone. Tell the suit to call Natalie. You will see a photo of a woman with red hair, wearing a navy dress. That's me. If the suit calls Natalie, you'll get me."

"How do I know you don't just have Natalie's phone?" Harley asked. "Look, we got chased by people last night, Mister Stark keeps having panic thingies whenever I mention New York, I almost got kidnapped. Stealing a phone would be, like, the least weird thing to happen tonight."

Natasha sighed. "Is JARVIS there?"

"The computer? On and off. He's kind of all...loopy in the head and talking about cranberries."

"All right," Natasha said. "Ask JARVIS if he can do a quick vocal identification."
"Master Harley?" said JARVIS. "This is the installation of my operating system speaking from Stark Tower in New York. If you would please be so kind as to instruct my counterpart to have Mister Stark call Miss Rushman from the Legal Department at his earliest convenience, we would be much obliged."

"There are two JARVISes?" Harley asked, his voice rising in pitch.

"Technically, we are part of the same system," JARVIS explained, "but the installation of my software powering the suit has been cut off."

Natasha heard Harley groan. "Mister Stark needs to stop it with his proprietary wireless signals. I mean, I get it, security and all, but he kind of seemed totally unprepared for his house getting blown up by terrorists. Okay, Miss Rushman, right? Is that Natalie?"

"Yes," Natasha replied. "Natalie from Legal."

"Any message?"

"Just to call me," Natasha replied. "How exactly did you come by the suit?"

"You mean Iron Man? Mister Stark broke into my garage,". Harley explained. "And then everything changed when the Fire Nation attacked."

"Are you safe?"

"Yeah. I think so, yeah. Anyway, I need to stay here and charge Iron Man."

"Where exactly is Mister Stark?"

"I don't know. Somewhere on his way to Miami."

"Miami, Florida?"

"Yeah. He made me double-check that, like, six times."

"All right. Thank you, Harley." Natasha frowned. "Merry Christmas."

"Merry Christmas, Natalie."

When JARVIS closed the phone connection, Clint groaned.

"What--no, wait. I don't want to know. He left the armor with a fucking kid?"

"It's a kid who understands the concept of proprietary wireless protocols," Natasha replied. "I think he did better than leaving it with, oh, ninety percent of the adult population. Miami. Miami. What's in Miami?"

"Strip clubs," Clint replied. "And that place with the frozen blue drinks that contributed to one of the sickest nights of my life. And--"

"What's in Miami that Stark might be looking for?"

"When has Stark ever not been looking for strippers and booze, Nat? When?"

Natasha gave him a pointed look.

"Sorry," he muttered, and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm just a little pissed he fucking let us
think he was dead. On Christmas. He let Steve think he was dead on Christmas. Do you even think he told Pepper?"

"Pepper," Natasha repeated. "Pepper is in Miami."

She got up from the sofa. "I need to call the Doc. I... Clint, can you call Steve? Text him? Something?"

"He's going to be pissed."

"Pissed is better than miserable."

"Just saying. Yeah, I'll--"

Clint looked her over, frowned. "I'm gonna call Bobbi again, too. I'll be right back."

He got to his feet, and she kissed him, once, softly, raked her fingers through his hair to smooth it back down, dropped her hands to his shoulders. He kissed her between the eyes, barely touching her, a light brush of his lips before he stepped back. "This is just for today, yeah?"

She nodded. "For Christmas, I think. It seems like it’s right for Christmas. You?"

"Yeah," he answered. "It...sounds stupid, but it's sort of good to feel human again."

He sighed, dropped his hands to his sides. "Right back."
Bruce's phone rang through to voicemail; she sent him a quick text wishing him a merry Christmas and asking him to call when he could.

Then she tried Fury.

"Widow? What is it? We're just sitting down to breakfast."

"Stark, Sir. He's on his way to Miami, Sir."

"He--" She heard an audible groan. "You heard from him?"

"Not exactly; I located the suit. I--it's a long story. But I think we should get people on the ground in Miami. Barton and I can--"

"The Feds aren't going to like this."

"Is that a yes, sir?"

"It's a-- not you, Widow. I can't let the press turn the Avengers into Tony Stark's government-funded bodyguard. You know how that's going to look. But I'll have people ready to deploy. Morse is down in Cuba; she can be there on my order."

Natasha went so warm with relief that she missed the end of Fury's sentence. "Can you tell her to call Barton? She's not picking up her phone."

"I'm not a marriage counselor, Widow."

"I'm not asking you to be one. He hasn't spoken to her in months. He's worried, and he won't say it."

She heard an audible sigh. "Does he have the details on the Stark situation?"

"He's been with me all day," Natasha replied.

"Then Barton can brief her on the mission."

"We don't know a lot, Sir."

"Then it's going to be a short briefing, isn't it?"

"Merry Christmas, Director."

"I never in my life thought I'd hear a 'Merry Christmas' from the Black Widow," Fury informed her.

"What can I say?" Natasha asked. "I'm trying to-"

Her phone beeped. "I need to take this call," she said. "Widow out."

"Bruce?" she asked, as she switched to the call that was attempting to connect.

"Did you just call Brucey by his first name? Wonders never cease."
"Stark," Natasha replied. "I talked to your friend. Where the fuck are you?"

"Oh, that kid's great," Stark said. "He needs to work on his basic principles of aerodynamic design but he got me a watch. It's a limited edition."

"Stark. Location, please."

"Waffle House," Stark answered.

"What?"

"You know, Waffle House, friend to stoned college students everywhere? Delicious hash browns?"

His voice became muffled. "Oh, yeah, that's lovely, Irene, yes, more coffee, and then the check, too, please."

"Stark?" Natasha asked.

He was chewing into the phone.

"What?"


"Did Cap put you up to this?" Stark asked. "Because I already told him no, no I'm not coming for Christmas, I'm in the middle of something pretty big, Pep's been kidnapped, military cover-ups, exploding humans--"

"Exploding humans?" Natasha asked. "This wouldn't be somehow connected to a company called Advanced--"

"Idea Mechanics? Yeah, them. I met this guy, like, almost fifteen years ago? Pep used to work for him. I guess we pissed him off."

"Get me your location," Natasha said. "I can help."

"Fury's letting you help? After I threatened terrorists on national television? Because the sixteen very angry voicemails I got implied the contrary."

"Not from the ground,"

"I don't--look, it's just the suit; I'm waiting for it to charge; it got kinda dinged up," Stark explained. "Harley has that under control; kid's a trooper. I've got it timed, by the time I get to where I'm going, I'll be able to access the suit, and then...then...Nat."

“Yes?"

“One second, I’ve gotta sign my bill"

Natasha waited while Tony exchanged a few more words with the waitress; she heard the timbre of the white noise in the background change, the echoing hum of fluorescents fall away and be replaced by the rumbling of a highway.

“Nat?” Stark asked asked again.
“Stark?”

“Oh, good, you’re still there. I was worried you’d get mad and hang up. Listen, Nat… I need you to do me a favor…one I can’t do from here. And I’m not sure anybody else can do it.”

“What is it?”

“I have…a couple of dozen suits buried under rubble out in Malibu. I’ve done the calculations and I figure they can proooooobably dig themselves out, but, like…somebody’s got to tell them how to do it. And I need somebody who can override my security protocols.”

“You could give me your security protocols,” Natasha replied.

“Negative. I’m not doing that over a Viastone network, sweetcheeks. You can figure it out; you’re a smart cookie. Listen, the--”

Her phone beeped again. This time, she looked at the screen. Stark had plugged in everyone’s contact information, so the name that popped up on the screen was “Jolly Green Giant.”

“Fuck,” Natasha whispered.

“Is that Fury?” Stark asked.

“Yeah,” Natasha replied. “Go ahead. He can wait.”

She heard a motor start up. “Listen,” he said, “so the suits are kind of like giant metal homing pigeons these days. You just need to get them to dig out, and they’ll be able to trace my coordinates once the Mark 42 is fully online. It’s…gonna take some time, so if you can do it now, talk to JARVIS; he’ll walk you through what he can tell you. And then he’ll send the message to the suits.”

“Got it,” Natasha replied. “Do you need anything else?”

“A fucking back massage and a seven-fifty of bourbon?” Stark replied. “Nah, Nat, you don’t mind taking care of the suits, you’re golden. Listen, I’ll try to call in later, alright?”

“Right. Don’t kill yourself again.”

“Merry Christmas.”
Natasha moved for her computer, pushing the startup button before she told her phone to call Bruce’s number.

He picked up instantly.

“Natasha?”

“Stark’s alive,” she said. “I was on the phone with him when you called.”

It was only after she blurted out her message that the quiet note in his voice registered, the hesitancy as he spoke her name. “Is everything alright?”

“Fine,” Bruce said. “It’s fine now. We had a scare, is all.”

“With your father?”

“No, with my little cousin. Uh. Not little, I just still think of her as little. You know. We’ve been at the hospital all day. But it’s going to be fine now; I’m just going to have to push back our dinner plans.”

“I didn’t know we’d set a day. Bruce,” she said. “Take your time. She’s really alright?”

“Yes,” he said. “But we’re going to have to run some tests, and I’d rather oversee them myself. Is Tony really alright?”

“Tony Stark is never really alright,” Natasha answered. “But we accept the hand we’ve been dealt. I’ll call you if anything changes. Do the same?”

“Of course,” he said.

She waited, expecting him to say more, maybe a ‘Merry Christmas,’ maybe to ask a question, maybe just goodbye, but the call ended.

She logged in to her computer, waited for JARVIS to give her the network identities for the suits—or, well, enough roundabout hints to the network identities of the suits, as he was specifically instructed not to give that information to anyone under any circumstances—and then began the somewhat tricky process of decrypting Stark's logins without any kind of key. Fortunately enough, she'd figured out the pattern to Stark's passwords-- he tried to pull random strings out of his head, but there were certain numbers and letters he tended to favor.

She heard footsteps: slow, easy, a little loping.

"Clint?"

He stood behind her, slid his fingers over her shoulders, began kneading gently. She rolled her shoulders back, into the pressure, and he nestled his chin in her hair.

"Bobbi called," he said. "For a briefing. I guess I owe you for that one?"

"Fury's idea," Natasha replied.

"So I owe you for that one. I just--shit, Nat, I ran into that chick who looks liked her again, at
Argo. It’s killing me. I didn’t care about anything else, just that she was—"

"You’re going to need to call her back," Natasha said, matter-of-fact. "I heard from Stark. We’ve got more intel."

She stopped typing, let him wrest her into a hug.

"Thank you," he said quietly. "She...she sounded good. Better than after New York."

"We all sound better than after New York," Natasha said.

"I told her we’ve got a neighbor who looks like her."

He snorted, rolled his eyes.

"She told me I should ask her out. She actually talked about Phil," he said. "She wouldn’t ever talk about Phil."

"Well, neither would you. It’s understandable."

He went quiet; his arms went slack. "I guess so," he agreed, and he moved his fingers back to her shoulders, stroking tiny circles with his thumbs. "I got Steve, too. He sounded..."

"Inscrutable?" Natasha suggested.

"Yeah. That’s a good word for it."

"Is he coming back?"

"No idea. You-- what are you doing?"

"Trying to crack Stark’s suits. He needs me to send them to Miami and I don’t think he’s anywhere he can get remote access."

“How long’s that going to be?” Clint asked.

“Considering he pulls random alphanumeric strings out of his ass?” Natasha replied. “Maybe a while.”

“We didn’t make dinner plans,” said Clint. “It’s Christmas and we don’t have dinner plans. I’m thinking about eating a jar of cocktail olives.”

“That’s a terrible idea.”

“So briny," Clint insisted. “Cocktail olives and maybe Oreos. I’m willing to share,” he added, walking his fingers up her neck, twisting them into her hair. “Or to order from Szechuan Gourmet.”

“How gallant.”

“I’m thinking we just order all the really weird shit they have that we always joke about ordering,” Clint said. “I’ll get your weird jelly bean thing.”

“It’s mung beans,” Natasha corrected, out of habit.

“Jelly bean thing,” Clint repeated. “And ox tongue. And we could get one of those whole fish things they do. And julienned jelly fish. Unless that’s really just fish jelly like your stupid beans.”
“I’m pretty sure it’s real jelly fish,” Natasha replied.

“Pig’s kidneys. I’m getting pig’s kidney,” Clint mused. “And stir-fried frogs. It’s going to be the best Christmas dinner. Better than Kilinochchi.”

“We went four days without food in Kilinochchi. You were eating toothpaste and hiding in trees. I was up to my neck in a vat of snakes.”

“See?” said Clint. “Better than Kilinochchi.”
Distraction

Steve walked in in the middle of their Chinese takeout Christmas feast. Natasha thought it was all delicious, but Clint was making noises about the olives and Oreos again.

"It'll be great," Clint said, as he forced down a piece of frog. "An entire meal of things that begin with the letter O. Onions. Orangina. Oatmeal. You love oatmeal."

Natasha pushed the container of ox tongue over in front of him.

"Yeeeah, maybe not every food that begins with O," Clint replied.

"I really thought there was going to be a punchline here involving oral sex," Natasha said nicely.

Clint put the lid on the ox tongue. "Help me put the food away and there can be," he offered.

"God, Clint, you need to get out more. Your lines are steadily declining in quality."

"That's not a line. I don't waste lines on you."

As if to illustrate, Clint crawled over the sofa, straddled her with his knees, pinned her down by the shoulders. She laughed even as she yielded, leaned in just enough to kiss him, grinding her teeth into his lower lip.

"I didn't see anything!" Steve exclaimed, and when the two of them straightened up, sat beside each other stiffly, exchanging glances that made them barely capable of concealing their laughter, he was standing just to the side, eyes averted.

"Oh, fuck," said Clint. "Do we need to explain birdy-beesy shit?"

"I'm aware of the principles of procreation," Steve said, but he couldn't quite look either of them in the eye.

"Do you want to join us?" Clint asked nicely. "No procreation required."

"No!" Steve exclaimed, turning rather the color of a lobster. "I mean. Er. Thank you, but I'll..."

"Sit, Steve," Natasha implored. "We have all this food, and Clint's too picky to try it."

Steve gave her a questioning look, and then sat down, not on the sofa beside them, but on an ottoman, across the coffee table.

"What is all this?" he asked, tilting his head to one side as he stared at the food, wide-eyed, a confused expression on his face.

Natasha pushed a few dishes over. "Ox tongue," she started.

And Steve's eyes lit up. "Is it good?" he asked, grabbing a flimsy white plastic fork to dig in. "I haven't had tongue in...since..."

He shut his eyes as he put a piece of the tongue in his mouth, set the fork aside, sat, hands on knees, looking as if he were in utter bliss.
“It tastes wrong,” he said, after he had swallowed. “Chinese spices, I guess, but the texture...the last time I had tongue was...well. Before the war. Decades.”

Natasha passed each of the dishes to him, slowly, and Steve took small morsels, just enough to taste, and savored each one as if it was the most exceptional food he’d ever eaten. Natasha realized, as she watched him, that it might be. She decided that whenever Stark managed to extricate himself from yet another round of mortal peril, they should discuss remediying Steve’s lack of culinary experience.

When Steve had polished off the last of the food--which had been far too much for two people, and probably too much for six-- he uncurled himself from the posture of a ravenous wolf, and straightened up.

They had both been watching him eat, though Natasha's passive curiosity was at odds with Clint's wide eyes and slightly agape mouth.

"Should I order more?" Clint asked.

Natasha patted his knee. "Order yourself something you'll actually eat," she suggested.

But Steve was looking at them, hands clasped between his knees, chewing on his lower lip. He'd open his mouth for a moment, then return to chewing, and it was obvious that even Clint noticed.

"Spit it out, Steve," Clint said, even as he pulled up the Seamless app on his phone and started thumbing through takeout menus.

Steve took a long breath. "He's alive," he said. "You talked to him? Actually talked to him?"

"Yes," said Natasha.

"Where is he?" Steve asked. "Why didn't he...did you tell him he's an insufferable ass?"

"On his way to Miami, and no, I thought you'd want the pleasure of handling that yourself," said Natasha.

Steve gritted his teeth. "And why aren't we going to Miami?"

"Unless you've learned to fly, Cap, we have no way to get there," Natasha pointed out. "I called Fury; he's sending an operative."

"One of the best," Clint put in, with a sidelong glance at Natasha.

"And Stark had me, ah, send some additional backup."

"The suits?" Steve asked. "He figured it out, didn’t he?"

“Figured out what?” Clint asked.

“Controlling them remotely,” Steve replied, sticking a finger into a plastic container to rescue the last of the garlic sauce. “We discussed it. It’s the next logical step in the suits’ evolution. I don’t really get why he still feels the need to be inside the suits, if he can pilot them remotely, but…”Steve grimaced, and licked his fingers. “It was months ago, anyway, before he stopped talking to me.”

Natasha could see the muscles in his jaw tighten.

Steve cleaned up the takeout containers, told them that he was fine, that he didn't need help, and it
was his way of thanking them for putting up with him for the past few days.

Natasha took that to mean that he was not actually fine, but wanted to be left to be not-fine on his own.

Natasha went down to her workstation, checked the progress with the suits, and then went up to her suite.

She opened the icebox, pulled out a seven-fifty of vodka, and went to Clint's.

"I'm getting drunk," she informed him. "On the roof. With you."

"Am I getting drunk?" Clint asked.

"Up to you."

He disappeared for a few moments, then re-emerged with a six pack of beer and his jacket.

The roof deck spread out along the contours of Tony Stark's penthouse, glimmering in the moonlight, still scarred with sootmarks, a length of railing replaced with chain link fencing, exposed electrical panels, though most of the debris from the Chi'tauri invasion had been cleared.

Natasha stepped to a place in the railing that was still intact, looked out over the vast, dark expanse of Central Park stretching out to the north. She opened the bottle, swigged directly from it.

Clint opened his beer against the railing, finished half the bottle in one gulp. "I didn't realize you needed to get drunk to screw me these days," he said, and he gave her one of those concerned looks, the searching ones, his eyes slightly narrowed, his brow slightly creased, his head cocked to one side.

"On the contrary, you might be the only thing that isn't driving me to drink at the moment."

Natasha said, with another swig of vodka. She reached for Clint’s beer, took a sip: it was too yeasty, too malty, and too cold for her tastes. She handed it back.

"They’re a bunch of children, Nat," Clint replied. “Steve at least has an excuse, but he’s still so…”

He threw up his hands, beer sloshing in the bottle. “So so.”

“I’ve always admired your way with words,” Natasha teased.

“Yep, that’s me, golden archer, golden tongue. You know what I mean, though; I don’t have to say it. Stark pisses me off the most. You’d think with everything he has…privileged fucking baby. I thought he was dead.”

“I didn’t,” Natasha replied.

“But you’re smarter than the rest of us,” Clint said. “I know, I know Banner and Stark are supposed to be the geniuses, but that’s all scientist shit. Might as well be magic. You get hold of Banner?” he asked.

Natasha nodded. “He’s staying out there longer. Family problems.”

“You’re not freaked out by him anymore,” Clint observed. “You haven’t been freaked out for a while. At least since the hurricane.”

“It’s never been him,” Natasha replied. “It was always the Hulk.”
She stopped speaking and took a long drink. And then another.

“The Hulk isn’t going away,” Clint said.

“I know,” Natasha replied. “But I feel like we can trust the man who controls him. I...I think something happened out there, though.”

“Out-- oh,” said Clint. “In Ohio? With his aunt?”

Natasha nodded. “Something happened to his cousin, and he...he said he needed to stay there; he...sounded as if he were taking responsibility for it.”

Clint sucked in a breath. “Well, fuck.” He finished his beer, opened another one. “So, Nat, I know we said...but if you want to take a rain check, if you’ve got shit to work out--”

“No,” she said. She set down the bottle, reached for his shirt, twisted the fabric (always worn soft) around her fingers, pulled him toward her. “I need to get my mind off it.”

She kissed him; he wreathed his arms around her, beer still in hand.

“Right,” he said. “Distraction, it is.”

She smiled, licked the blood off her lips where they’d been chapped from the cold night air, where the scruff of his chin had scraped a little too hard. “What do you say we break into Stark’s penthouse?”

Clint raised an eyebrow. “Merry Christmas?”
Just a teensy temperature

When they descended, painfully early the next morning, hair mussed, in some combination of the right and wrong clothes, winter coats on but unbuttoned, Steve was stirring scrambled eggs with one hand, holding the phone to his ear with the other. His nostrils were flared, his eyes glittering, his jaw tense—his entire posture was rigid.

"No, I’m telling you, you don’t get to—"

He glanced up, cut himself off, pressed his lips together, and didn’t comment on the fact that they were wearing each others’ shirts, or that Clint had Natasha's socks tugged over his hands like mittens.

"They're here now," Steve said, and he held out the phone to Natasha.

"The phone's been ringing off the--" he frowned. "Not that they ring or have hooks anymore. But. A lot. You--"

"I'll handle it."

Clint didn't say anything: he moved to a cabinet, lifted out dishes, lay three place settings out on the kitchen island, retrieved Tabasco and ketchup from the fridge, and started making mimosas, all while whistling 'Christmas is All Around.'

"This is Widow," Natasha said, giving Steve a questioning look.

"Nat!" Stark exclaimed. "Look, we're sort of in the ICU right now, but I'm going to need somebody to make sure the Soho place is aired out and J is functional over there...he'll take care of alerting staff and ordering groceries and all that shit, but you've gotta actually turn him on; I don't keep him operational over there all the time, you know, energy conservation and everything, just--soooo..."

"Stark," Natasha said. "Status?"

"You need my status?" Stark asked. "Why do you need my status. That's what I thought the 24-hour news cycle was for."

"It's five in the morning; none of us have turned on the--" She stopped herself, tried not to groan. "I'm to take it that whatever you've done made the news?"

"Sugar, whatever I've done is the news," Stark retorted. "I've got Pep, everyone's okay, they've arrested the Vice President, and--"

"The Vice President?" Natasha asked.

"Yeah, he--look, just watch the news. Or, you know what-- Agent," he said, his voice becoming slightly muffled. "Agent Morse, could you be a doll and send--"

She could almost hear the expression that had to be on Bobbi's face through the sudden silence. She snorted.

Stark cleared his throat. "I mean, I mean could you please send Agent Romanova your report? Yeah, that'd be great, thanks."
His breathing was audible for a moment: deep, slow, as if he were trying to remain calm. "So, look, Pep and I are going to come up there for a bit, if you can tell Brucey--"

"Banner's in Ohio," Natasha replied.

"Oh. Well, I'll call him, then."

“And Pepper?” Natasha asked.

“Oh, she’s in observation; that’s why I want to come to New York; I want Banner to take a look at her. She’s...it’s really just a teensy temperature, but it gets worse when she’s upset.”

Natasha felt a heaviness in her throat. “Gamma radiation?”

“Nah, nah, it’s more like a virus.” Stark laughed. “Don’t worry; I wouldn’t let my girlfriend get Hulked. Listen, I’m gonna go peek in on her; I’ll tell her you said hey. Can you explain to Cap that I’m not the devil? Thanks, babe; you’re a keeper.”

He made fake smooching sounds and hung up without waiting for her response.

“He--” Natasha started.

“He’s coming to New York.” Steve said, gloomily, as he laid out toast and eggs on plates.
The week that followed was a whirl of chaos. Natasha was ejected from her workstation in the lab to make room for Stark, who was researching feverishly, poring over documents and microscopes and Petri dishes and a very temperamental ficus.

“She belonged to a friend,” Stark explained, as if in lieu of apology, when the plant managed to erupt in sparks all over Clint while Clint was helping Natasha move her things upstairs.

“She?” Clint asked. “Your ficus has a gender?”

“Of course she does. Her name is Daphne. Now, stop upsetting her or she’ll explode again.”

Clint rolled his eyes, sucked at one of the larger little burns on his forearm, and hauled a box of books upstairs.

Pepper was in town, too, though they barely saw her; she was holed up in Stark’s Soho apartment and didn’t seem keen on leaving. Steve, on the other hand, took Stark’s presence as an excuse to vacate the Tower as much as possible; he would disappear on his bike in the morning and not return until late at night.

“Where the fuck is he?” Stark demanded over dinner one night: he had taken Clint and Natasha to Telepan, and had initially asked JARVIS to reserve four places, as per Natasha’s suggestion, but Steve was nowhere to be seen.

“He’s supposed to be the fucking team leader; why isn’t he with the team?”

“You quit the team, remember?” Natasha said, and held out her glass for a refill. “He is in no way obligated to have dinner with you.”

“He shouldn’t feel obligated,” said Stark. “It’s not an obligation. The way Cap eats? He should have been here an hour early. What does he have to do that’s more important than this?”

“He’s with Pepper,” Natasha answered, arching an eyebrow.

“What?” asked Stark.

“Pepper. He’s been going down to Soho and keeping her company because she doesn’t feel like leaving the house. You really didn’t know that?”

“How would I know that? No one tells me anything.” Stark was scowling now. “Apparently, my own girlfriend doesn’t tell me anything. What do they-- they don’t even have anything in common!”

“Playing card games, as far as I know,” replied Natasha. “Talking about art. Pepper tried to show him Green Porno but I think he was weirded out. He’s been cooking for her.”

“Cooking? If she wanted a cook--”

“Somebody sounds jealous,” said Clint. “Maybe she needs attention, now that you’re spending so much time with Daphne.”

Stark slapped the back of his fork against his plate with a clatter. “Don’t talk about Daphne that way.”
“Whoa. Down, boy. She’s a tree.”

“She’s the result of an extremely important experiment. Groundbreaking, even.”

“Big fucking deal; she’s an exploding plant. We ran into exploding mice. Nat found exploding dildos. Well, Didn’t run into them. Er.”

“It’s the same technology,” Stark answered, rolling his eyes. “We went over this already. Maybe someday we’ll have a discussion about something you’re an expert on, and then you can be a wiseass about it. Oh, wait, that’s not going to happen, because nobody cares about the Wheelbarrows of Reddit.”

“And you wonder why Steve doesn’t want to have dinner with you,” Clint retorted. “I’m ordering the most expensive entree on the menu.”

“I wouldn’t expect any less,” said Stark, suddenly cheerful now that he had irritated Clint. Don’t worry. “Brucey’s back tomorrow, and then you won’t have to see me.”

“Thank god for small blessings,” said Clint. He ordered the hundred-dollar ribeye for two for himself, and ate it all.

Clint vanished as soon as they returned to the Tower. Stark hovered around Natasha in the common area, shifting from foot to foot.

“You usually just say whatever thing is on your mind,” Natasha said. “Why the hesitation?”

“What did I do wrong?” asked Stark. “I got his bike out of storage. His own fucking bike. I fixed it up myself. I spent an arm and a leg on those parts--”

Natasha groaned. “Stark,” she said. “Do you really, really give that much of a damn about what he thinks of you?”

“No! But, I mean, he’s Captain America. If Captain America hates you, doesn’t that pretty much put you on par with the Nazis and syphilis?”


“National television. I know, I know--” Stark ran a hand through his hair. “I’ve heard it a million times from Pepper. If they would just-- huh,” he said, frowning.

“Just noticed what they have in common, did you?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah,” said Stark. “Yeah, I guess...it’s just...Pep wouldn’t do something like that. She has a right to get mad, because she’d never-- never-- do something like that. And she got stuck in the middle of it. And she got hurt. Cap doesn’t-- he got buried alive. At least I’m not doing any of this out of some kind of misguided black-and-white moral code. Those fuckers hurt one of my oldest friends. Tell you the truth, I was fucking surprised Stevie-boy didn’t try to dive into that fray with his whole ‘America, Fuck Yeah,’ complex.”

“We got warned off,” Natasha said. “You didn’t get the warning because you were effectively back on consulting duty.”

“Yeah?” Stark asked. “There was a warning Cap paid attention to? From whom?”

“The Vice President of the United States.”

“Not when he was involved in his own treason,” Natasha replied. She shrugged. “It wouldn’t have been the first time.”

He eyed her for a moment, turning his head to one side, as if he might see something different in his peripheral vision, as if she might disappear or change like a holographic image. “I guess not.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Natasha replied. “Go home to Pepper.”

“Shit,” said Tony. “Yeah, I should do that. Look, Brucey’s supposed to be getting in tomorrow night; can you tell him to let me know when he’s back?”

“Tomorrow night?” Natasha asked.

“Yeah, tomorrow night. Why? You look like you forgot something.”

She tapped her temple. “He gave me something to read.”
"Le Petit Prince," Steve read slowly, his consonants too harsh, vowels too horizontal.


"I know. I learned French in the war," Steve replied. "Documents, you know. Vichy was hell, but they had good people in the resistance."

"This was written by a fighter pilot from your war," Natasha explained. "It supposedly took place while his plane was down in the Sahara."

She handed the book to him.

"It's a true story?" Steve asked.

"Not in the strictest-"

"It's a bunch of crappy lessons," Clint interrupted. "God, Nat, Banner gave that to you? And you're actually reading it. in French? Oh, please, I bet French makes it even more pretentious."


Clint flicked at the cover. "You never read the books I give you, Nat."

"You don't give me books, you link me to fanfiction," Natasha pointed out.

"Well, I think Dora the Explorer grows up into a fascinating young woman who reminds me of you, what can I say?"

Steve was looking at the book with increasing fascination. "Lorsque quand j'avais six ans...once when I had si-- when I was six-- the Illustrations are really--" he thumbed through it. "Is that a boa constrictor that's swallowed an elephant? Could I borrow it?"

"It belongs to the Doc," Natasha replied. "But I'm sure you could, if you asked him."

"A children's book about a boy who runs around planets learning life lessons about greed and despotism and cleaning your room before it gets out of control," Clint answered.

"That's in there, yes," Natasha replied. "But it's mostly a book about how love is slow and arduous and sometimes--"

She paused.

"Sometimes hurts."

"And then you commit suicide by snake. Uh, spoiler alert," said Clint. "Sorry, Nat, I think you managed to make it sound even less appealing than it already was."

Later, Natasha made her way down to the lab and left Bruce a copy of the Historia Calamitatum and the ensuing Epistolae of Heloise and Abelard, in the original Latin.

She stood there, looking at his desk, at the small library of books that now rested, lined up against the wall, in the order she'd given them to him.
And she looked down at the newest addition, and hesitated, hands sliding over the cover, wondering if she should take it back.

She forced her hands to her sides, gave the room one last look, and left, quickly, before she could change her mind.
Bright, springlike

Natasha missed Bruce’s return: she and Clint had been sent out to clean up some of the remaining loose ends of the Mandarin hoax, bring in a few straggling conspirators, retrieve documents and weapons and drugs.

She saw him in passing, in the kitchen, reading in the living area, once in the elevator-- he’d smiled, warmly at her as he boarded, but then a clerk from the Stark Tower mailroom boarded behind him, separating them from each other with his cart full of parcels. Bruce got out on the infirmary level, before the clerk departed.

Three days after he came home, she walked to her new desk, in the office area where she’d been stationed during those first weeks in the Tower, and found a new book on her desk. It was wrapped, this time, in pretty paper: not Christmassy paper, not even generic winter holiday paper, but bright, deep pink, speckled with hand-stamped silver flowers: bright, springlike.

She opened the package carefully, lifting one corner of the tape with one fingernail, so that she could preserve the paper.

The book inside was impossibly old: covered in red cloth, printed with a black-and-white illustration of a little girl and what appeared to be two little men in high hats with beards. The girl looked as if she were unwinding a spool of thread, the thread winding its way through the gilt letters of the title: The Princess and the Goblin.

She opened the cover, gingerly, to find the printing date, and instead found another sliver of the pink paper, with one word and one number, written in Bruce’s painstakingly neat hand that he used for labeling experiments-- nothing like his usually sloppy notes.

Dinner? 8?

She folded the note up, slid it into her pocket, pressed a finger to the printing date on the flyleaf: 1910, Philadelphia, before closing it, and leaving it to rest on her desk, not entirely sure she should be reading from such a fragile, well-preserved volume.

She located a .pdf instead.
Natasha showed up outside Bruce's suite promptly at eight, with a bottle of champagne. She had, after some consideration, decided that a meticulously climate-controlled apartment building should be used to one's advantage, and pulled a sundress out of her closet: a white dress with slender straps and a tulip print the same color as the paper *The Princess and The Goblin* had been wrapped in. Pink heeled sandals. Hair pulled up away from the nape of her neck, blue topaz earrings that had been liberated from a dictator's wife who had been left with her skull crushed, in a pool of her own blood, on the floor of the manor she'd had inlaid with the bones of the children whose parents had dared to resist her family. They were marquise-cut, in silver settings shaped like unfurling leaves.

Bruce didn't look at the dress, didn't look at the shoes, just met her at the door as JARVIS let her in and fumbled as he took the bottle from her.

"Champagne?" he asked, squinting at the bottle. He turned, headed for the kitchen.

"I bought it for New Year's," she answered.

"New..." Bruce frowned, then gave her a questioning look before he put the bottle in the fridge.

"That's this week, isn't it?"

"You missed it," she answered. She glanced around his kitchen. It was spare, as spare as a kitchen in Stark Tower could be, only outfitted with the things that had been there when they'd moved in, with the addition of several pots and pans, and an enormous spice rack.

"I couldn't have--" Bruce started.

"You and Stark were locked in the lab," Natasha replied. "Stark had instructed JARVIS that you weren't to be disturbed. Steve and Clint and I popped popcorn and did karaoke in the theater."

Bruce's face fell. "Ah. Well. We were working on a tricky sequence with Daphne."

"Don't look so glum, Doc," Natasha replied. "I saved you champagne."

He smiled at that, a small smile that he shared with the kitchen floor, not with her. "I'm a little behind tonight," he said, sweeping his arms around the kitchen, where vegetables lay unchopped on the counter. "Tony tried to keep me in the lab again. I would have stayed, under other circumstances; you wouldn't believe the excuses I had to make."

"I wasn't a good enough excuse?" Natasha asked.

Bruce ran a hand through his hair. "I didn't exactly tell Tony about this."

She considered inquiring further, and then decided against it. "Would you like some help?"

"I thought you weren't much for cooking," Bruce replied. "And I couldn't, not when you're..."

Now he gestured toward her dress. "You dressed up."

"If this is supposed to be my Christmas present to you, I thought I might as well pull out all the stops," she said. "Give me an apron. I'm shit at cooking, but I'm great with knives."

He chuckled. "I know," he answered, and handed her a knife and an apron. "You okay with
onions? I need those two sliced."

"Fine with onions," Natasha assured him.

"Nothing makes you cry, does it?" He asked.

"Not much," she answered.

She put on the apron and set to chopping. Bruce opened a package of something distinctly non-vegetarian.

"Meat?" Natasha asked.

"Liver. And bacon. Classic winter comfort food," Bruce replied, and he checked a pan in the oven, layered with potatoes in butter. "It seemed like the right way to go. Plus, this liver looked beautiful, and you're not Tony or Clint, so there won't be any Hannibal Lecter jokes."

"Glad I brought champagne and not chianti," Natasha retorted. "How'd Ohio go?"

"It went," Bruce answered, a little tersely.

She took a breath, and he glanced at her, his lips pursed together, the corners of his eyes turning down, and she let the breath out slowly, relieved.

"It wasn't you," she observed.

He shook his head. "Of course it wasn't," he replied, sounding a little hurt. He held out his hand for the cutting board, she passed it to him, and he dropped the onions into a skillet full of butter.

They sizzled, then simmered.

"You said you needed to observe; I didn't know what else to think," she explained softly.

He kept his eyes on the pan on the stove. "Jenny needed a transfusion. She's... missing a common factor; they couldn't just draw from the bank. Somehow between her parents, our aunt, my father... I was the only match."

Natasha felt herself holding her breath, and forced herself to release it before speaking. "How is she?"

"There are abnormally high levels of gamma radiation in her blood; it's... I was hoping it wasn't transferable, that it wouldn't... but the irradiated blood is passing off characteristics to the normal blood cells, and I..."

He turned toward her as he spoke, and she saw the lines in his face crease deeper, his cheeks lose some of their color even as he stood over the hot stove.

"I should really still be out there," he said. "But Tony and Pepper... and the Extremis virus... Extremis is displaying characteristics that-- it becomes harder to regulate the temperature when a recipient is distressed, so..."

Natasha pulled a glass from the cabinet-- above the sink; Bruce was the sort of efficient personality who would keep glasses above the sink-- and filled it with cold water, then handed it to him.

"Is she going to be like you, then?"

He took a long drink and set it down. "I don't know," he answered. "The way it's interacting with
her blood isn’t identical; it might be due to the secondary exposure, but...I don’t have any way to explore further. No safe way.”

He ran a hand through his hair, turned his attention back to the stove. “If anyone finds out...I become a much bigger danger than just the Hulk. I’m a...source. For more creatures like that.”

The onions had turned translucent, begun to shimmer. Bruce put thick strips of bacon in a second pan.

Natasha nodded. “So I’ll make sure no one finds out.”

She watched Bruce’s shoulders roll back slightly, lower, as if a weight had been lifted. “How would you...Natasha, you know I wouldn’t ask you to…”

“I’ve done bigger favors for people who were less important,” she assured him, as she leaned back against the counter. “There’s no danger. Does Stark know? I’ll want to borrow his network, if you don’t want SHIELD to find out.”

“Tony...might know?” Bruce answered. “I explained it to him, sort of, but he’s been...kind of distracted with this whole Extremis thing. He keeps trying to explain something about some party fourteen years ago, and I keep nodding off. I’d feel bad, but he keeps doing the same thing to me.”

“But you don’t mind telling him.”

“No. Tony’s good at secrets, as long as they’re not his own.”

“So I’ll need to talk to Tony, and I might need to come out to Ohio with you, the next time you go.”

Bruce glanced back at her, and smiled. “I’d like that.”

“I would, too.”

Natasha popped the cork on the champagne, filled two juice glasses.

"I even have wine glasses," Bruce said, apologetically. "No champagne flutes, though."

"This is fine," Natasha assured him, and they clinked their juice glasses together. "We're doomed to always drink from the wrong glasses."

"The question is, do you down champagne like it's Russian vodka?"

Natasha held her juice glass with her pinky out and sipped very daintily. "I'm drinking champagne with liver and bacon," she pointed out. "We're already very, very far out of the bounds of propriety."

She batted her lashes, exaggeratedly, and watched Bruce over the rim of her glass. He opened his mouth, then shut it, grimaced, ran a hand through his hair.

"Just...gi...give me five minutes," he said, his voice halting. "...finish cooking."

When they sat down to eat, at a table set with flowers: two pink Gerbera daisies in a glass milk bottle, Bruce held out her chair for her. He was quiet for a moment, eyes shut, meditative, although he didn’t say a prayer.

Natasha simply watched him, waited for him to look back up, and took a bite.
And then she took a breath. "I feel like I should ask if--"

And Bruce's phone rang. He winced, and pulled it out of his pocket.

It rang again.

He muttered something under his breath. "It's Tony," he said. "I have to take it."

The phone rang a third time.

"Go ahead," she said. "I'll be here."

"Tony?" Bruce answered the phone. He tapped the speakerphone button.

"Hey, brussel sprout," said Stark. "I've got a breakthrough, are you busy?"

"I'm having dinner," Bruce answered. He sighed and shrugged at Natasha.

"Ooh, what are you having? I'll come up there; I think I found-- it's excellent news, Bruce, I just need your opinion on some of this bio-"

"Liver," Bruce answered.

"Neeeeever mind," answered Stark. "Really, Brucey, are you trying to starve me?"

"There's macaroni salad in the fridge," Bruce answered. "Not the sample fridge; make sure you don't put it back in the sample fridge. You'll contaminate everything."

Natasha could hear the suction-sound and subsequent hum of a refrigerator opening, the crinkling of tin foil.

"Beautiful, Bruce, you're a saint. Finish up and get back down here; I think I've figured out how to fix Pep."

Bruce, mid-bite, looked to Natasha, plaintive. She motioned with her hand for him to go, and he gave her a little nod. "Twenty minutes," he said, and he was just about to hang up the phone when Stark spoke again.

"Great," he said. "So let me catch you up while you eat, and we'll be able to start as soon as you get down here. So I was messing with the variables for the speed of transference of the viral anomaly, and I realized that if we raise the number of proteins in..."

Once Tony Stark started talking about science, it was impossible to find a place to get a word in edgewise.

Bruce tapped the mute button. "I'm sorry," he said. "I'll kill him."

Natasha poured more champagne into his glass. "I fully expect you to. Slowly, and with much relish."

"You make him sound like a hot dog," Bruce said.

"Rain check," Natasha replied, and nodded to the phone. "Take care of Pepper."

Bruce nodded, and unmuted the call.

Eighteen minutes later, exactly, Stark took a breath, laughed, and said, "That's it. Make sense?"
"I think so, yes," said Bruce. "I'm not sure I agree about the alkalinity of the soil, but it's easy enough to test."

"Done eating?" Stark asked.

Natasha had already cleared the dishes, loaded them into the dishwasher, wrapped the leftovers and put them into the fridge.

Bruce sighed. "I'll be right down," he said, before shutting off the phone.

He got up from the table, wiped his mouth with his napkin (in that order), and looked around the apartment suite, stepping in a little circle, his hands waving at his sides.

"I'll clean up," Natasha said. "I'm almost done, anyway."

Bruce grimaced. "I'm sorry, Natasha. I'm so--so--your dress, and..."

"It was supposed to be my gift," Natasha reminded him. "I'm sorry. Go be a genius."

He smiled at that-- barely, a little half-smile, but he did smile, picked up his phone, and walked out the door.

Alone in his apartment, Natasha finished cleaning, looked over his bookshelves, considered exploring the rest of the suite, and decided not to, before leaving a copy of Jean Racine's *Phedre* on the kitchen table.
Hospital Records

Natasha went back to her still-new workstation, found the correct Jennifer Walters in Dayton, Ohio, and started falsifying hospital records.
The raincheck never happened. Bruce spent seventy-two hours in the lab, and the only time Natasha saw him was when she went downstairs to bring him a sandwich-- peanut butter and jelly, which was the best she trusted herself to do.

"Why don't I get a sandwich?" Stark asked irritably, looking up from some contraption he was cobbling together.

"When you make me lunch every day for four months, you'll get a sandwich, too, Stark," Natasha said. She put the tea kettle on. "I will make you tea, if you'd like."

"Long Island Iced, please," Tony retorted.

"I have rooibos, green jasmine, and peppermint," Natasha said, checking the boxes. "And a tiny bit of chai."

"Those aren't things," said Stark.

Natasha sighed, put two bags of green jasmine in two cups, and settled down on the couch to wait for the water to boil.

She took one cup to Bruce, and sat back down with the other.

"It's a peanut butter sandwich," said Stark. "I don't see why it's so difficult to make two."

"Stark, I'm the world's top-rated assassin; I hardly think it's worth making a fuss over a sandwich."

"Exactly!" Stark agreed. "Thank you, Natasha; I knew you'd see sense. Do you have grape jelly?"

Natasha groaned and went back upstairs.

Stark didn't bother to thank her for the sandwich. He took a bite, then promptly abandoned it to try sending electrical currents through Daphne's root system.
Six hours later, Natasha, Steve and Clint were on a flight to Florence, Italy.

"Your Italian sounds like something out of Inglourious Basterds," Clint said, as they practiced with him.

"It's better than your Russian," Natasha pointed out.

Clint made a face. "Your mom is better than my Russian."

"Should I start to describe all the ways in which that was a terrible application of a 'your mom' joke?" Natasha asked. "Beginning with the fact that my mother was most likely Russian--"

"Speculation," Clint said. "Sheer speculation."

"And considering a log would be a better fuck than you are at Russian--"

"This isn't helping me with Italian," Steve said. "I'm rusty as hell; I haven't spoken it since forty-four."

"Your accent could use a little work, is all," Natasha explained. "Your vocabulary is passable, your grammar is impeccable--"

"We had good contacts in Italy," Steve explained. "The country might've been ruled by Fascists, the Pope was as big a coward as they come, the Church was dirty as hell, but the regular folks were real decent. Catholics," he explained.

"You just said the Church was dirty," Clint said skeptically.

"That's sort of the big bad secret of the Church," Steve admitted. "The Vatican's always been a mess. It still is. Maybe even worse."

"But you're still a Catholic," said Clint.

"Only in the loosest sense. God gave us free will," Steve said. "Some people use it to do terrible things in His name."
Natasha heard the way Steve sucked in his breath when they crossed the threshold of the Duomo. He stood, still and breathless, hands slack at his sides, staring up toward the pinnacle of the domed roof, stepped back, dipped his fingers in the holy water font and crossed himself.

"It's magnificent," he murmured.

He squared his shoulders and pointed up. "Barton, I need you on that catwalk," he said. "Seven o'clock. See where the--"

"I see it," Clint assured him. Clint took out his camera, pretending to be an obnoxious tourist until a uniformed guard cleared his throat and tapped the "no flash photography" sign.

"Mi scusi, mi scusi," Clint said, in an exaggeration of Steve's accent.

Steve glowered at him from the pew where he and Natasha were sitting as Clint brought the camera over, showing them both the display.

"There," Steve said, pointing at the photos of the confessionals. "People going in and not coming out. That's where we need to go."

"I go in," Natasha replied. "I can pass for Italian."

"I--" Steve cut himself off, and nodded. "I'll take the entry. Call if you need cover."

She smiled. "You know I won't call."

"I'd say it was wishful thinking, but I hope you don't have to."

When it was done, the sixteen agents in the basement were dead, the weapons that had most certainly never belonged to SHIELD claimed by a SHIELD team. Natasha made sure that Steve never got a close look at them.

"It doesn't make sense," Steve said, as they signed off on the transfer. "Pennsylvania at least sort of made sense. How did weapons from the helicarrier get out here?"

Clint glanced at Natasha. "Black market? What I want to know is how come there's a criminal underground meeting in a fucking church."

"You heard what I said about churches, Barton," said Steve. "What I want to know is where I can get gelato."

"Steve," said Clint. "You eat gelato every day. Grom is on the first floor of the Tower."

Steve shook his head. "That's not gelato in Italy."

As they left the church, Natasha felt eyes on her; she glanced back. For a moment, she thought she saw a glint of metal, a red star, dark hair.

She turned, and Steve stopped when she did, whirled on his heel.

"Buck--" he started, and then clamped his mouth shut, glanced at Natasha, sprinted toward the
alley where she’d seen the man standing.

But he slowed at he arrived, and Natasha, catching up with him a moment later, caught her fingers in his sleeve. “Steve?” she said.

“I thought I saw someone I knew,” he answered quietly.

She nodded. “And then you realize the person you thought you saw couldn’t be there at all.”

“Yeah,” he answered.

Steve ordered gelato without butchering a single consonant (bacio and fiordilatte), and they strolled, slowly, over the river to Pizzeria Dante.

"You know the pizzerias here?" Steve asked, when their pizza arrived, all sliced meat sizzling on melted cheese.

"Just this one," Clint said, in between bites. "It was a thing."

Steve frowned, but nodded, and poked at his pizza curiously before digging in.

Natasha ordered Campari and soda for the table.
She went down to the lab when they reached the Tower, before she bathed or slept or even changed her clothing. There was no sign of Bruce, no sign of Stark.

But Pepper was there, sitting on the sofa, reading a magazine, in sweatpants and a tank top, hair pulled back in a ponytail, no makeup, the most casual, and the most vulnerable Natasha had ever seen her.

Pepper looked up from her magazine, and Natasha walked to the cabinet where they kept the tea.

"Where is everyone?" Natasha asked.

“They got called away,” Pepper replied.

"Away...?" Natasha deliberately trailed off, as she filled the teakettle, lifted a box of tea from the shelf, dropped two tea bags into two teacups and sat down on the other side of the sofa, far from Pepper, while the water boiled.

“Avengers-related...something,” Pepper said. She sucked in her lower lip, and lifted her magazine back up, stiffly.

“They called in Stark and the Doc? They--” Natasha paused. “Stark...doesn’t have a suit.”

“I know,” Pepper said quietly. She sighed, and abandoned her pretense at reading. “I don’t know what-- Tony just said they had to go.”

Natasha got up from the sofa, caught the handle of the teakettle just before it started to whistle, poured water into both teacups, handed one to Pepper, pointed her toward the milk and sugar, and did a quick sweep of the room before leaving.

She found a copy of *Tuck Everlasting* sitting on Bruce’s desk with an individually-wrapped, handmade, chocolate-covered marshmallow on top of it, folded them both into her hands, and waved to Pepper on her way out.

“Steve’s back in, if you want company,” she told the other woman. “I’ll be-- I need to call in to Fury.”
“I’ll explain,” Fury said, when he picked up the phone.

“Yes, you will,” Natasha replied, pacing across her living room. She put the marshmallow in her mouth, bit off half of it, tearing at it with her teeth like a puppy. It was satisfyingly chewy, the chocolate melting over her tongue, the marshmallow sticking to her teeth.

“We’ve got a very distraught soldier left over from the Extremis project,” Fury answered. “She agreed to let them test their cure, in exchange for immunity.”

Natasha collapsed onto the sofa.

“You thought I’d go back on our bargain,” Fury observed.

“I know you would,” Natasha replied. “If it was necessary.”

She ate the rest of her marshmallow. “The rest of the team was gone. Something might have been necessary.”

“Stark says he’s giving up the suits,” Fury told her.

“That’ll last a month,” she replied.

“Would you put money on that? We have a pool.”

“One month from the day he cures Pepper,” Natasha replied. “What are we doing with him until then?”

“He wants to stay on as a consultant,” said Fury. “Do you know what he bills per hour? We’re one of his best contracts.”

Natasha snorted. “Well, we get plenty in exchange. You should add a few more agents to the roster; the accommodations are plush as hell.”

“When I can find someone who can put up with the rest of you, I will,” said Fury.

“That’s a tall order, Director. Sometimes I can barely put up with this crowd. Listen,” she said, after a beat. “This whole...HYDRA. Is it really HYDRA; is it just some dickheads trying to be funny?”

“Does it matter, if they’re taking up the mantle?” Fury asked.

“We need to tell Cap. He’s going to figure it out on his own if we keep finding dead HYDRA agents at the end of the rainbow.”

“You’ve read his file,” said Fury. “What happens when he finds out?”

“He decides he’s singlehandedly responsible for stopping them,” Natasha replied.

“Do you think he’s up to it? Not to be rhetorical; if you’ve seen progress…”

She sighed. “Understood, Sir.”
“I need to be certain he won’t get himself killed the first year on the job. The minute we know he’s not a danger to himself, we tell him.”

She hesitated a moment, weighing the consequences of telling him the rest, considering the possibility of being sent back to psych evaluation. “I’m being followed. Or we’re being followed. I’m not sure yet.”

“Oh? Threat level?”

“Uncertain. Potentially high, but I’ve got no idea what their motivation is. You know any shapeshifters, Director?”

“Not any that are following you,” Fury replied, without missing a beat. “Shapeshifters? Really?”

“I keep seeing the Winter Soldier.”

There was a pause on the other line. “And you’re sure it’s not.”

“I’d know.”
In the days that followed, while they were waiting to hear the results of the cure, word from Stark or Bruce was sparse. Natasha coaxed Steve and Pepper out of the Tower and across the park to the Metropolitan Museum of Art, with promises of the Matisse exhibit for Pepper and the George Bellows exhibit for Steve.

“He was forty-two,” Steve said, transfixed in front of a painting of two boxers in the ring. “He did all this, and he only lived to forty-two.”

“You say it like you haven’t accomplished anything,” said Natasha.

“I…”

They turned a corner, and Steve stopped, sucked in a long breath, the color draining from his face.

The painting in front of them was of a red boxcar, sickly men and women shadowed within, as soldiers unloaded them—violently, threatening them with rifles, a boot pressed into a fallen man’s hip.

Steve’s lips were parted slightly, and he blinked rapidly, as if blinking one more time might make the painting disappear.


He swallowed. “It looks like my war,” he answered, put his fingers to his temples, turned away, and came face to face with a painting of two soldiers cutting a man’s hands off at the wrists, another one strangling a woman in the background. “I need to sit down.”

They left Pepper at the museum, after she took one look at Steve’s face and assured them that she would be just fine. They wandered to the Barnes & Noble on 86th Street, where Steve got a hot chocolate and a cookie from the coffee shop, and Natasha bought a copy of Plato’s *Symposion* to leave on Bruce’s desk.
This entire fucking playhouse

Natasha only found out that the experiment was successful when her phone played "Hit Me With Your Best Shot," the next day.

"Nat, can you buzz me into the Tower?" Clint asked plaintively. "It's fucking freezing and I don't have any gloves."

"What-- did you lose your badge again?"

"No, Stark fucking locked me out," Clint replied.

"What? Why?" Natasha asked. "Wait, Stark's back?"

"Back," Clint replied. "And apparently disapproves of people eating his fucking leftovers."

"You ate his leftovers?"

"It was just pad thai!! I told him I'd order more!"

Natasha sighed and went to the intercom, buzzed the door.

"Is the Doc back, too?" she asked.

"I think? I didn’t even know Stark was back until I got unceremoniously booted. Why, did he loan you another kids’ book? What is it this time, The Very Hungry Caterpillar?"

“The what?”

“It’s exactly what it sounds like,” Clint answered. “It’s a book. About a hungry caterpillar. Spoiler alert, it turns into a butterfly.”

“Caterpillars always do,” Natasha agreed. “If they don’t die.”

“You are far too old for children’s books, Nat,” said Clint. “Listen, word of warning, before you see Stark.”

“Hmm?” Natasha asked. She left her suite, walking toward the common lounge, in mind to head off any potential altercations when Clint arrived.

“Stark’s talking about--”

“Absolutely not!” Pepper said, her voice raised. Natasha lowered the phone as she stopped in the doorway, backed up a pace, so as not to interrupt, but it was enough to see Pepper in profile, her cheeks flushed to a high pink, her arms imperiously folded over her chest. “Tony, we have a home.”

“That’s mostly under the Pacific,” she heard Stark reply.

“We have a company. Out there.”

“We have a tower right here.”

“I need to be in California for work,” said Pepper. “I can’t-- I’m not picking up my entire life and moving across the country on a whim because you...”
The elevator bell rang, and Clint stepped off, his hand still glued to his ear. “Nat? Can you hear me? I can’t--- ooohhhh,” he said, as he caught sight of her.

“It was just an idea,” said Stark plaintively.

“It’s a terrible idea,” said a third voice from the common lounge-- Steve.

Natasha clenched her teeth.

“And who said you get any say in the matter?” asked Stark.

“I’m Team Leader,” Steve replied. “This is Avengers Team Headquarters, and last I checked, you weren’t part of this team anymore.”

“I seem to remember there being a name on the outside of this tower,” said Stark.

“I seem to remember the name getting blasted off the outside of the tower,” replied Steve. “As far as I recall, there’s just a goddamn big ‘A.’ Gee, what does the letter ‘A’ stand for again?”

“I can think of a particular seven-letter word that starts with the letter ‘A,’” said Stark. “In fact, I can think of several words that start with the letter ‘A.’”

“And none of them are Stark, because you’re not on this team, and there’s a strict team members only policy around here.”

“I bankroll this entire fucking playhouse,” Stark retorted. “So whether I’m technically a member of the team--

“Is a moot point,” Pepper chimed in. “Because we’re not moving to New York. Tony, you still have panic attacks every time we even talk about going up to the penthouse.”

“Do not.”

“I could say ‘do too,’ but none of us are five years old,” said Pepper. “Tony.”

Natasha heard a shift in the tone of Pepper’s voice, from clipped and strained to calm and efficient, businesslike, the tone she remembered from working for the woman.

“We have to go back to California anyhow,” said Pepper. “We can keep talking about it.”

“You see how she says ‘keep talking about it,’” Stark said, his own voice still pitched up, “That’s how you know the discussion is done.”

There was an audible huff, and footsteps advancing toward them. Natasha pulled Clint with her, into the laundry room just as Stark came into the hallway.

She listened for the elevator bell, the sound of the elevator doors opening, then closing again, and then led Clint by a handful of shirt back into the lounge.

“--how you put up with that,” Steve was in the middle of saying.

“He’s had a rough...few years,” said Pepper.

“Mostly by his own doing,” said Steve.

“Not entirely,” replied Pepper. “He’s--”
“Believe me, Miss Potts, I’ve read his file. And I’m not telling you what to do, but if I were a lady, and a gentleman had that little regard for my wishes, I wouldn’t stick around.”

Pepper sighed. “You’re definitely not a lady, Steve. And I appreciate your help, but this was our quarrel, not yours, and I would have preferred to keep it to as few parties as possible.” She looked pointedly in Natasha’s and Clint’s direction, until Steve noticed and turned around. His cheeks flushed, and he sat down hastily on the sofa, picking up his sketchbook, suddenly busy.

“Back to California, then?” Natasha asked.

“Tomorrow,” Pepper replied. “SI has state-of-the-art medical facilities all to ourselves out there; what we have on the East Coast can’t compare.”

Natasha smiled. “I’m sure that’s only a matter of time. Good-- good luck, Pepper.”

Pepper sucked in a breath. “Thank you. I-- I’d better go check on Tony. I don’t want him to think that--”

She didn’t finish her sentence; she nodded to the group of them, and left the room.

“Stark’s an ass,” said Steve. “He doesn’t deserve a woman like that. Someday she’s going to leave him, and he won’t even know how to feed himself.”

Natasha waited a moment for JARVIS to check his protocols, irritated at the indignity of having to ask permission to enter the lab where she'd been working for so many months.

"My apologies, Agent," said the computer, "but Sir has very strong feelings about security given your previous history together."

"I have very strong feelings about surveillance given our previous history together," Natasha retorted.

"Which is precisely why I have not alerted Sir to the bypass you've placed on my feeds in your private quarters. Just a moment, Agent. You're cleared."

Natasha smiled and stepped inside.

Bruce didn't look up; he was carefully leafing through books, setting some aside while others went into his messenger bag.

She sidled up to him, stood beside him at the counter where he was working, nudged him with a shoulder.

"California?" she asked.

"For a week. We're going to need to observe. How was the mission?"

"Classified, as usual."

"Sounds charming." He bumped her with his elbow. "I assume you know I couldn't have gotten through Freshman philosophy without Plato?"

"That's why I got you an annotated edition," Natasha replied reasonably. "That was a sad one. The book about the people who couldn't die."

Bruce nodded, still working. "I read it as a kid. I didn't quite understand why Winnie would refuse immortality. It's one of those books that transforms with life experience. I don't know that it's exactly for children, but it...it's more profound, if you read it as a child and then...have that epiphany yourself, the moment when you understand."

"I think I'm being followed, Bruce."

He put down the notebook he was inspecting, turned, gave her a cautious look. "Do you want me to stay?"

She laughed. "I'm not afraid. I just want you to keep an eye out, too. Most of the work I've done the past few months has been with you. I think it might have something to do with that girl from New Jersey."

"The telekinetic?"

"That one, yes."

"She was in Italy?"
"Someone was in Italy. But this mission...was very different. I can't put two and two together here."

"You can take care of yourself with this one?"

"Bruce. I held my own with you, I can handle a little telekinesis."

He smiled. "That's my girl."

But then he frowned, his brow dipped, his expression became serious. "Sorry. S-sorry, that was presumptuous."

"It's a figure of speech, Doc." She patted his shoulder. "And a rather nice one, too."

He glanced back at her, over his shoulder, then slid a stack of books across the counter. "I didn't want to leave you without reading material," he said.

There were three books, all by the same author, in library bindings.

"Five Children and It?" Natasha read off the cover of the first book. She turned it over, eyeing the illustrations, of children in the sand, surrounding some thing in a sand pit. "What, is this about the Avengers?"

"Hm," said Bruce. It wasn't quite a laugh, it wasn't quite a snort, but he smiled, and started thumbing through notebooks again. "It's about wishes."

Natasha had very little chance to read, as the next week found her undercover in a Syrian prison (linking a Roxxon Oil executive to the leaders of a political uprising that strategically raised the price of barrels of crude) before she had to follow Clint to Bavaria to get him a clear shot as he assassinated a man who had been killing children in a pitch to re-animate corpses.

When she was finally in a place where she could look at her personal phone, she had three voicemails from Bruce, and one text message.

The text message was one word.

*Dayton*

*I'll be there*, she texted back.
She had tracked down Susan Banner's address, which wasn't difficult at all-- Bruce’s aunt was still listed in the phone book-- and fifteen hours later, she was on the phone with the SHIELD-recommended car service when she recognized Bruce by his familiar slouch, standing at the baggage claim, hands in his pockets, swaying a little in place.

He was distracted, looking at the lights on the arrivals board, then at his watch, at his phone, at the baggage claim label with her flight number on it.

She snatched at his jacket from behind, tugged a little so he bobbed as he turned.

"You're here!" he exclaimed, and he looked at her with wide eyes, mouth parted a little, as if he were actually shocked to see her. He reached up, rubbing the back of his neck, looked down at his shoes.

"You're not supposed to be the surprised one," Natasha replied, and she laughed and hugged him, a gesture that sent him stumbling back. He flailed a little, finding his feet before he returned the embrace, patting her on the back in a soft, arrhythmical, stilted sort of way.

“I’m not a baby,” she said, with a laugh. “You don’t have to burp me.”

“I--” He stepped back.

“I don’t have any checked bags,” she told him. “I came straight from Munich. I...if I couldn’t tell you a mile away, I would have hired a cab and you would have been left here all alone.”

“Sorry,” he said. “I’m sorry.”

She shook her head, hugged him again. “I’m here,” she said. She reached up, smoothed his hair, which was sticking up at odd angles, as if he hadn’t combed it. He looked haggard; the rings beneath his eyes darker than usual.

“I’m here,” she repeated. “And you look terrible. Are you alright to drive?”

He grimaced. “SHIELD won’t let me drive,” he said. “Being out here is the only chance I get to drive. Besides,” he said, with a tiny, wry smile. “I’m about ten times safer than an air bag. I don’t see what the problem is.”

“Road rage?” she asked.

Bruce caught the strap of her bag and hefted it onto his own shoulder, then caught at her fingertips, lightly, as if grasping for purchase but unsure it would take.

She pulled his hand into hers, knit their fingers together.

“I got you a hotel room,” Bruce said, as they reached the car. "I didn't think--"

She laughed. "What, you don't want your family to meet your murderous co-worker?"

The car was clearly his aunt's, a tiny blue Volkswagen Jetta that was in immaculate condition in spite of being probably ten years old. It smelled like perfume, Snickers bars, and window-cleaner.

"It's more..." He hesitated as he bucked his seat belt. "I don't want them to get the wrong
impression. Susie--"

"Is going to be overly excited that you're bringing a girl home?" Natasha buckled her seatbelt, set her bag in her lap as Bruce handed it to her.

"Well, I haven't exactly told her about the alter ego problem. And the only other person I've brought home recently is Tony," Bruce replied. "And given his reputation..."

He shrugged and started the car.

"I don't think I'd be interested even if I did like men. Not that he's not, er..."

"Extremely attractive until you get to know him?"

"That's a very nice way of putting it, yes," Bruce agreed. "I...Tony's good. He's better than most people I know. He came out here and completely re-wired Susie's house, on his own, just after New York. The richest man in the world, doing electrical repair on a little old lady's house. But then he..."

He sighed. "It's just that I don't want to speak badly of anyone."

"Understood," said Natasha. "Say no more. So you just...what would the wrong impression be?"

Bruce paused, pursing his lips, his eyes fixed on the road ahead. "The only reasonable inference to make."

"And what's so wrong with her thinking that?" Natasha asked.

She watched his fingers tense on the wheel. "I don't think it's a good idea, Natasha."

She watched him for a long moment while he took a deep breath, released it slowly.

"I play at things for a living," Natasha told him. "It won't bother me, and it...well, she'll be delighted, won't she?"

"I don't know," said Bruce. "I really-- my family, they just--"

"Doc," Natasha said firmly. "I didn't come all the way out here to sit in a hotel and wait around for you. You asked me to come. Pull in at the next shopping center."

He glanced at her, out of the corner of his eye, but did as he was told a few miles down the road.

Natasha picked up her bag, unlocked the door. "Give me fifteen minutes."
"...never brings women home," Aunt Susan concluded, even as she kissed Natasha's cheek. "Bruce," she said, her voice a little shrill, although she was smiling at her nephew, "you didn't tell me what you needed the car for."

Bruce was scratching the back of his head, a little sheepishly. "Er, ah...surprise," he managed, clenching his teeth in a nervous sort of smile.

"Surprise indeed," said Aunt Susan. "He never told me about you. He never tells me anything. Do you want some coffee? Tea? Where are you coming in from?"


"Munich! That's a long way away. And you came straight here?"

Aunt Susan wasn't looking at her, she was looking over Natasha's shoulder, at Bruce, one eyebrow cocked fully up.

"Bruce?" said Aunt Susan. "Come help me with the tea. Sit anywhere you like, Natalie."

Natasha sat down on the sofa while Bruce and his aunt disappeared into the kitchen; she guessed from Susan's expression and tone that Bruce was about to get the sort of scolding usually relegated to teenaged boys.

The house was, in appearance, the polar opposite of the Tower: small, but bright, airy, full of soft fabrics and pastels, stuffed to the brim with embroidered pillows, figurines, and other tchotchkes. The walls were hung with pink flowered wallpaper; there was a little brick fireplace, a bay window, crown molding.

Items that didn’t quite belong were scattered about here and there: a badly-painted ceramic jewelry box (heart-shaped), an awkward oil pastel drawing of a cat, framed as if it were a great work of art. Natasha leaned over, inspected the jewelry box more closely, opened it, found it full of wallet-sized school photos of Bruce, maybe years younger, hair fluffy and unkempt, glasses tilted, a forced photo-grin displaying teeth that clearly had yet to see braces.

She put the lid back on the box, smoothed her skirt: she had spent her fifteen minutes in the shopping center dressing in a Panera bathroom, putting on makeup, so that she didn’t smell like someone who’d gone from killing sixteen people to a fifteen-hour flight to a little house in the suburbs. She was dressed conservatively, for her, in jeans, a v-neck tee shirt and cardigan, and a single string of pearls, her hair pinned up in a loose french twist.

Bruce had raised an eyebrow when he saw her.

"Impressing the relatives isn't exactly my usual assignment," she'd pointed out.

He had just smiled, shaken his head, started the car.

She could hear muffled conversation in the next room, but she pointedly attempted to tune it out. When Aunt Susan returned with tea, Bruce following behind with a tray of cookies, she straightened up, accepted the teacup, dutifully complimented the house, answered Aunt Susan’s questions about where she was from (born and raised in New York, of course, Aunt Susan should have known from the accent, parents died in a small aircraft accident, sadly), where she lived (near
Columbus Circle, not too far from Bruce, she’d be happy to take Aunt Susan around if she came to visit, no, she hadn’t seen a Broadway show in a good long while, and where she worked (at Stark Tower, in the Stark Industries’ legal department, yes, she and Bruce had met at work, no, he never left his lab there, either, no, she didn’t know why he’d never mentioned her, Bruce, yes, of course, they’d met during his work orientation, how long ago was that? But no, she wasn’t a vegetarian, they didn’t have dinner plans, did they?).

Aunt Susan asked her about the Battle of New York, what it had been like, whether she had seen the invasion.

She nodded. "I was there," she answered, and looked to Bruce, questioning.

Bruce looked back, and, without hesitation, slipped an arm around her shoulders, leaning into her comfortably, as if it was something he did every day.

"Nobody wants to talk about that anymore," he said. "Here, Nat, have a cookie."

"I lost some friends," Natasha explained. She took the cookie, dipped it in her tea, licked at the melting chocolate.

"Oh, I'm so sorry, dear, I forget, people probably ask all the time," Aunt Susan said, fidgeting with her teacup. "Nothing that exciting usually happens out here--except, did Bruce tell you?"

She put a hand on Bruce's knee. He twitched briefly, then relaxed, and clasped his hand around hers.

"Tell me what?" Natasha asked.

"We actually had our very own Hulk sighting," Susan said. "Right here in town. At some seedy bar. It was a Lady Hulk." She sat up straighter, squared her shoulders proudly. "That's why Bruce is in town. He was sent to--"

"By SHIELD," Bruce put in. "Natalie knows about my, err. Day job."

"Oh." Aunt Susan's eyebrows both went up. "We're very proud of our Bruce, after spending all these years running around the world, trying to find himself, like a boy just out of college, and now he's in New York, he has an excellent job, maybe finally ready to--"

"Susie," Bruce said with a sigh.

"I'm just looking out for your well-being," Aunt Susan answered. "Anyway, there was. Just like your Hulk in New York, only a woman...our Jenny was there, she saw it..."

"Speaking of, I didn’t tell Natalie; I hate to run out on your invitation, but I told Jenny I’d check in on her and bring dinner."

"Oh." Aunt Susan blinked, clasped her hands in her lap, brought her knees a bit closer together. "Of course. Tomorrow, then?"

"Tomorrow," Bruce assured her. "Jenny’s just shaken up over this whole thing."

"My heavens. Is she alright?" Natasha asked. She gave Bruce's hand a squeeze, looked earnestly at him.

"Exhausted," Bruce replied. "But otherwise unharmed. You've seen the aftermath of the Hulk."
He pressed his lips together, a little grim. "This one seems to manifest differently than ours."

"Considering it made a public spectacle of itself," said Aunt Susan. "I don't mean to be old-fashioned, I try to be open-minded, but there are just some things a lady should keep covered."

Natasha nodded, a sober pout on her face, not wanting to start a pointless argument about propriety.

"Well, this Hulk appears to be newer than the male one," Bruce answered. "She doesn't exhibit the same signs of conscious control, she's showing a more erratic radiation signature...the male Hulk appears to have learned about human clothing, somehow. Perhaps with time...We don't even know if the two Hulks are aware of each other."

"Well, let's hope not," said Aunt Susan. "The last thing we need is for those things to procreate."

"Given the amount of radiation they've both been exposed to, I don't think that's going to be a problem," Bruce assured his aunt. "Anyhow, who's to say they aren't related. Maybe they're brother and sister. Or cousins."

"We'll, I hope you're right," said Aunt Susan. "Can you imagine, baby Hulks?"

Bruce snorted. "The thought had crossed my mind. But I would say it's extremely unlikely."

Natasha patted his hand.
"You see why I wanted to send you to a hotel?" Bruce asked, when they were in the car on the way to his cousin’s.

"I'm sure it was a very nice hotel," Natasha assured him, "but this was much more entertaining. She's charming, Bruce." She'd ditched the cardigan and the pearls, untucked her shirt, combed out her hair, had one boot up on the dashboard.

"And overbearing," Bruce said, running a hand through his hair. "And--"

"What did she scold you for in the kitchen?"

"It was equal parts not telling her you were coming, couldn't I see that the house was a wreck, and that she didn't see a ring on your finger, so forgive her, but we weren't sleeping together under her roof. Which, all things considered, solves the--"

Natasha laughed. "Bruce. You're forty-five years old."

"And she never got to make rules about girls when I was seventeen, so I imagine that she's just happy she's getting to do it sometime."

"Maybe we should reconsider that hotel room after all," Natasha said, keeping her voice light, eyes out the window.

"You're welcome to stay in a hotel if you want to," Bruce replied, and from his tone, even she wasn't certain whether he had deliberately misunderstood.

"The sofa bed in the basement is pretty comfy, though."

Natasha shrugged. "So. This cousin. Jenny? Tell me about her."

"She's...much younger than me. My father was the oldest sibling, her mother was the youngest. She's about your age, only out of law school a few years."

"And what happened?" Natasha asked.

"This time? I don't know. The kind of trouble Jen gets into usually involves men who don’t think they need to keep their hands to themselves around a pretty girl, or the sort of trouble only a criminal lawyer would get into. Seeing as this was apparently in a bar...well."

Natasha snorted. “I’d love to be able to turn huge and green and angry any time a man got sleazy."

“Really?” Bruce asked. “I’d assume you’re scary enough when you don’t want to be bothered.”

“Yes,” Natasha agreed. “But it doesn’t send quite the same message. Bruce? Did she know?"

“Know...? Yes. She knew," he said. “She’s...no one else in my family knows. But I told her...actually, just before this all happened. She laughed at me, said she didn’t need to understand nuclear physics, just that she was...proud of me, actually.”

“You saved New York.”

“Well. I destroyed it the first time, so I suppose it evens out?"
"I'd say you underestimate yourself. You should be proud."

If slight, shy, unassuming Bruce made a spectacular contrast with the Hulk, Jen was perhaps even more impressive. Pixiesque and bright-eyed, the diminutive redhead opened the door to her house with a grin, flung her arms around Bruce like he was an old friend she hadn't seen in years, squealed with glee at the sack of groceries he held up.

"When I asked for food, I expected take-out!" she exclaimed, and batted at Bruce's cheek.

Bruce kissed her cheek, easily, his demeanor relaxed and easy, as if her energy transferred to him. "Brought a friend," he said, waving to Natasha. "Jen, this is, er, uh--"

"Nat," Natasha supplied, and held out a hand.

Jen's eyes went wide, her grin broadened if that was possible, and she held out both hands, clasping Natasha's tightly, warmly. "So you're her!"

"Her?" Natasha asked, giving Jen's hands a squeeze in return before wriggling out of her vice-like grip.

"Bruce talks about you constantly. Constantly, you're all I've heard about. The man works with Captain America and Iron Man, and I wouldn't know it from talking to him, but you..."

Bruce looked flushed, seemed to be inspecting Jen's retro-styled geometric wallpaper. "I'll, er. ah. Put the groceries in the kitchen, just a..."

And Jen burst out laughing, put a hand to Natasha's shoulder as if they had been friends for years. "He's smitten," she said. "Sorry if this is awkward, I know he probably hasn't even gotten around to telling you that, but...the last time he had a girlfriend was, well, when the greenie-thing started, and shit got really weird."

"I know," said Natasha. "Don't worry. Look, Bruce told me you--"

Secret Agent Man played on her phone. "Sorry, I have to take this. Is there a place...?"

Jen directed Natasha to her office-- a cozy, cramped room full of file cabinets, bookshelves, and a surprisingly large collection of Avengers figurines, the ones Tony Stark had licensed out after the Battle of New York, the ones that gave her a significantly different facial structure, elongated her legs, straightened her hair, made her look as little like herself as possible in comparison to the very accurate figurines of the men, because Tony Stark sometimes actually was a genius, and had offered the toy manufacturer use of his own 3D sculpts.

"Director? This is Widow."

"Widow, where are you?"

"Director, you can track my location."

"I'd rather hear your pretty voice. Where the hell are you?"

"Dayton."

"Dayton? Dayton, Ohio? How did you--"

"Took an airplane. Really, Director, even Cap knows about airplanes."
"I didn't realize that. All those times he'd talked about crashing one, and--but how did you know we needed you in Dayton? Do you--you have the intel?"

Natasha was about to ask what intel when it dawned on her. "The Doc's with me," she answered. "We're looking into it."

"Excellent," replied Fury. "Listen, Widow, I don't know what caused this one, but you know Banner's originally from Dayton, so if there's any way...it could be transmitted, or..."

"I'm ahead of you, Director," Natasha replied. "No word yet. But we'll find it."

"I know you will," Fury answered. "Any more word on your shapeshifting friend? Since Italy?"

"None yet," Natasha answered.

"Let me know."

Natasha hung up the phone, shut her eyes for a moment, and went back into the living room. Compared to Aunt Susan's house, it was spare: the home of a woman in her late twenties who hadn't begun to accumulate belongings. What she did have, though, was top-of-the-line, classic, stylish, just a little quirky.

Jen was nowhere to be seen, but by the smell of toasting bread and garlic, Natasha assumed she had joined Bruce in the kitchen, and she followed the scents through a short hallway to the back of the house.

Jen was sitting, legs swinging, on top of a kitchen counter, and chatting at a breakneck pace, especially for someone who should have been tired out.

"So then...you know, my memory is kind of fuzzy, I don't remember a thing, except...I don't know, like anger behind my eyes. Just sharp and burning out my vision, and my shoulders are killing me, and I just...I'm really starved. I already ate a whole pizza. A whole stuffed crust pizza. Is that normal?"

Bruce nodded. "The appetite is normal, the aching, exhaustion, but you can learn to alleviate it. I don't need to eat as much as--"

"Are you kidding?" asked Jen. "You're telling me I'll be eating whole pizzas and not getting fat and you think I want to change that? That's a miracle."

Jen grinned and turned to her, waving. "My hearing is better, too. And my sense of smell. It's like everything is heightened, Bruce, how are you able to use that much garlic?" she asked, looking back at the stove.

He shrugged. "I like garlic."


Bruce looked up in the middle of chopping basil, laid the knife aside.

"My boss," Natasha replied. "Really, our boss."

"Do you have to leave?" Bruce asked.

"No," Natasha replied. "Little bit of a problem. We're being assigned to locate Jen."

Jen's feet stopped swinging. "What?"
Bruce returned to chopping. "I'm not surprised," he said quietly. "I just...suppose it depends upon whether Jen wants to be found."

"Do I want to be found?" Jen asked.

"I didn't," Bruce answered. "But I can't answer for you. You--"

"I'm an agent for SHIELD," Natasha explained. "The same organization behind the Avengers, Bruce's division. I've been assigned as a liaison to the group, which means I somehow keep getting stuck on supernatural duty. I can give you the same speech I've given Bruce."

"It's about how once you're dangerous, a lot of people are going to try to hunt you down," Bruce explained. "And that you're safer allying yourself with a group that has the best interests of mankind at heart. Seeing as I more or less can't be killed, I don't know why I should be concerned about safety--"

"Because you can't be killed, but you can still be used," Natasha chimed in.

"Yes," Bruce replied, pointing at her with the knife. "I knew I kept you around for a reason. Get the garlic bread out of the oven?"

Natasha opened the oven, fished for an oven mitt (Jen’s were, like everything else, stylish, patterned silicone), and drew out a loaf of toasty golden bread, split down the center and loaded with garlic and cheese.

Which was when the kitchen window burst inward, shattering the room with glass.
A More Perfect Union

Natasha snapped the pan down onto the stovetop, turned off the burners, snatched the knife from Bruce’s hand, dropped to a crouching position, all in a matter of seconds.

The next volley of gunfire shredded the cabinets behind her, blasted the dishes, sent brightly colored ceramic shards flying across the room.

Bruce had dropped down behind the kitchen island, tugged Jen with him, had a finger on his pulse, took a long, deep breath.


Natasha recognized the chant, the periodic table, from *A Wrinkle in Time*, when the Murrys tried to block the pulsating signals of the villainous giant brain.

But Jen-- Natasha watched Jen’s eyes tinge green, and Jen gasped, and retched, as if she were nauseated.

Bruce grabbed her hand. “Jen. Jen, stay with me. Watch me. Hydrogen, Helium, Lithium, Beryllium-- hell. That’s not a-- what do lawyers know? Try...We the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect union, establish justice...”

But the seams of Jen’s clothing strained, and burst, and her skin flooded with green pigment, and her hair went dark, and she screamed as she threw herself forward, toward the onslaught of bullets.

There was something different about her; unlike Bruce’s transformation, Jen’s other state was proportional, tall and still slender, even with her bulging muscles.

Natasha watched Bruce, watched him drop his fingers from his wrist, watched him steel himself.

He took off his glasses, held them out to her. “Cellar,” he urged quietly. “End of the hall. Right.”

“Bruce,” Natasha answered, giving him a pointed look. “I can--”

“You can,” Bruce agreed. “But I’ve bought you enough coffee that I think you owe me a favor by now.”

She snorted, took the glasses in one hand, the knife in the other, and scrambled back, stopping only for a moment to watch Bruce change shape in front of her eyes, put out an arm to shield his cousin from whatever was attacking.

The cellar was unfinished, concrete, spare, home to a few boxes, an old card table, a washer and dryer with a pile of women's clothing strewn atop it, and an exercise bicycle which didn't look like it got that much use, from the colorful bras strung over the handlebars.

She could hear the chaos upstairs: crashing, roaring, more gunfire, and she sighed, frustrated, and whipped out her phone.

"Widow?" Fury asked. "Status?"

"We beat someone else to her by minutes," she said. "We're going to need backup."
"Done," Fury replied. "Do you think she'll-"

"After this?" Natasha asked. "She'll want protection. But she's going to drive a hard bargain. Offer her training, freedom to live as a civilian-- she's a criminal attorney, you must be able to find someone willing to hire her on one of the coasts. Same deal as Banner: only use the Hulk at her discretion. Having her legal services in exchange is probably worth it."

"I'll consider your advice," said Fury. "How come you seem so sure she'll agree?"

"She's Banner's cousin."

Fury chuckled audibly. "I'm sending you a team."

“I knew you would.” Natasha hung up and dialed Tony Stark.

"Nat?" he asked. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I need Iron Man. Track my location."

"Nat, you know I destroyed all the suits."

"I also know you've built a new one you're not telling anyone about. I'm with Banner. We need a bodyguard. Now, Stark."

She heard the audible sigh on the other end of the line.

"I'll be in the air in five."
The only salvation, for Natasha, was that the cellar had badly-insulated windows that she could see through, once she climbed on top of the dryer.

The trouble with her vantage point was that it provided very poor peripheral views, which meant that she was only able to see occasional flashes of Bruce or Jen.

The battle seemed interminable: whoever was attacking had made a very good guess as to how much firepower they needed to subdue a Hulk, and the two of them, together, barely held them off. Stark arrived just in time to take out the attackers' aerial support and sent them scattering, and SHIELD's backup arrived minutes later, headed by a mercifully familiar face.

"Agent Morse!" Stark exclaimed, flipping up his face mask. "Good to see you again!"

Bobbi gave him a pointed look and stalked toward to house, mumbling something to her comm line. She turned. "What's the situation, Iron Man?"

"We've, uh, got the Hulk...well, we've got two Hulks, we..." Stark frowned. "One Hulk protecting another Hulk from guys with big guns? To tell you the truth, Natasha called me in, I have no idea what's happening. I'm just blasting anything that isn't a Hulk."

Natasha decided that her exile to the basement was officially over, and she squeezed out the window.

"Natasha!" Bobbi exclaimed. She hurried over, and they shared a brief hug. "Give me the details."

"Like Stark said. There's a new Hulk. Banner and I were called to bring her in."

"Really?" Stark asked. "Brucey agreed to that?"

"He didn't have much of a choice," Natasha replied. "Baby Hulk wouldn't have lasted on her own. As evidenced by..." She turned around, taking stock of the devastation: most of Jen's house was decimated, an entire outer wall collapsed, and two neighboring homes were on fire.

"Fire department?" She asked.

"Already called."

"Where's the Hulk?"

"He uh, took Lady Hulk, ah, She- Hulk? Shulk? Shulkie? What do we call her? He took her to the neighbors’ hot tub to chill out," said Stark.

About half the water had been displaced from the hot tub, and a dozen neighbors had crowded around, peering at the enormous green people splashing around in it.

"We need a perimeter before they change back," Natasha said. "And Bobbi, can I have your coat?" Bobbi directed her team to close off the area, told the onlookers that the party was over, told Stark to go sign autographs or something to keep the bystanders occupied, which he did very graciously, and went to deal with the rather shell-shocked local police officers, who had apparently shown up at some point in the fray but seemed uncertain about interrupting a firefight that involved two Hulks and Iron Man.
Natasha hopped the chain link fence that surrounded the pool and the hot tub, and stepped over to the edge, and left the stack of blankets and Bobbi's coat on the ground, nearby, then stood back and waited.

"Fuck! That's cold!" Jen exclaimed, a few minutes later, sounding relatively human. Natasha heard teeth chattering, turned, stepped forward.

Jen had managed to stand up, but was standing still, in place, shivering, still half-submerged in the hot water.

Bruce pulled himself out, dripping and rather more blue than green, and offered Jen a hand out.

It was bitter cold, they were both thoroughly soaking and naked, shivering in the evening air. Bruce saw the blankets, handed one to Jen before wrapping another around himself, and the two of them dropped to the pavement, arms around each other for warmth.


He shook his head, stood up as Jen pulled the jacket on. "Believe me," he said. "It's been worse."

He stepped forward, and she tugged at the blanket draped over him, pulled him closer, wrapped her arms around him. "SHIELD's here," she whispered. "And Stark's here."

"Tony?" Bruce asked. "How?"

"I called him," she said. "There has to be one of us who calls for backup in a fight."

He bowed his head forward, pressed his forehead to hers briefly, and ice crystals that had formed in his hair brushed her skin.

"We need to get you both inside," she said. She let go of him with one hand, reached for her phone, dialed Stark.

"Widow?" Stark asked. "How's the Jolly Green Giant?"


The hotel room came in useful after all--Bruce hadn't cancelled the reservation, and Bobbi drove them all to the hotel room, while she sent two of her agents to the nearest department store. In the meantime, Bruce sat on the hotel bed, wrapped up in the comforter, while Jen took a hot shower.

"The car," Bruce said uncomfortably. "We trashed Susie's car."

"I'll buy her a new car," said Stark. "I can get her an identical one, just get me the make and model."

"We're going to have a hard time explaining to Susie how we keep running into Hulks everywhere we go."

"Not your problem, Banner," said Bobbi. "I'll take care of it."

"She's my aunt."

Bobbi gave him a reassuring smile. "Tell her it has to do with Avengers business and it's covered by your NDA."
Bruce rubbed at his forehead.

"You haven't met his aunt," Natasha replied.

Once their clothing arrived, Bruce had showered, and Bobbi had debriefed the lot of them, Bruce grimaced at the red glow of the digital alarm clock. "Susie's going to expect me back...should I call, or..."

"Jen can stay in the hotel with me," Natasha offered.

"Better idea," said Bobbi. "I bring Ms. Walters to a safehouse. I have an offer to make her."

"Alone?" Bruce asked, bristling.

"Bruce!" Jen exclaimed. "I'm a lawyer. Negotiations are what I do for a living."

"We'll, you're all welcome in the safe house," Bobbi said. "But, yes, the negotiations have to happen alone."

Jen turned to Bobbi. "I take it this is a SHIELD-related offer?"

Bobbi's lips turned up in a slight smile. "It just so happens we could use another lawyer."

"I'd rather be there," Bruce said, this time firm, slightly clipped.

"It's not a question of what you'd rather, Doctor," Bobbi said. "SHIELD protocol."

"Doc," Natasha said. "I already spoke to Fury. They'll be fair."

He raised an eyebrow at her.

"They'll be fair," offered Stark. "You don't fuck with lawyers; they'll fuck you right back. Even I know that."

In the end, Jen went with Bobbi, Stark flew his suit to wherever Stark went after shooting repulsors at people for an hour, and one of the SHIELD agents drove Bruce back to his Aunt Susan's.

And Natasha was left in the hotel.

She had no idea what Bruce was going to say when he returned home without her, and without the car, but she didn't care. Instead, she left the hotel, walked into the first liquor store she could find that was still open, bought the most expensive red they had, two wine glasses, and a corkscrew (altogether a sixty-seven dollar purchase), took a car service to Aunt Susan's house, scaled the wall, determined which of the windows opened into Bruce's room, and climbed in.
The lights were out and the room was empty: Bruce's backpack sat on the floor, opened, the new shoes SHIELD had bought him that evening sat untied, neatly, by the door.

The room was spare: white walls and a wooden floor with a small braided rug in the center of the room, a twin bed, neatly made, with a rumple in the comforter where someone had clearly been sitting. She could hear water running down the hall.

She took off her own shoes, put them beside his, sat down in the dent on the bed, legs crossed, and uncorked the wine, pouring it generously.

The water stopped, the sounds of patters against ceramic replaced with footsteps, clanking, a toilet flush, another faucet turned on, briefly this time.

More footsteps fell, on wood instead of tile, and the door creaked open.

Bruce had his hand on the light switch before he saw her, dropped his hand with a start, and stared, still, but only for a split second before he regained his stride.

"I don't startle well," he said, and he stepped over, sat down on the edge of the bed beside her. "Not after a day like today."

Natasha picked up a glass of wine, held it out to him. "How's Aunt Susan?"

"Angry enough that I'm surprised she's not giant and green, but she's convinced that a letter campaign to the Daily News will somehow help."

He smiled, faintly, and raised the wine, sniffed it, took a sip.

"You didn't have to do this," he said.

Natasha shrugged and picked up her own cup. "Ritual is important," she replied. "I did it for me."

"It's...it's an eerie realization that I'm no longer alone," Bruce said. "It's...I'm not sure it's settled in yet."

"Jen's different from you," Natasha replied. "She's...more curious than cautious."

"She remembered more," Bruce said. "When I...when it's an accident, I have no memory. Even when I transform by choice, the memories are hazy...like glimpses of childhood. Jen already has bits and pieces, like she's remembering a dream. I don't know if it's...if her response to the irradiation is different, or the chemistry is...I'm going to have to keep testing."

Natasha reached up, tangled her hand in his hair. He frowned, took another drink. "You called SHIELD," he said.

"She can't be expected to know what she wants this soon," Natasha replied. "SHIELD can give her the space to decide, without having to hide or lose her connection to the outside world."

"Without becoming me, you mean." The way Bruce said it was matter-of fact, calm, not bitter or accusing.

"Yes, in a sense," Natasha replied. "But you were already you, long before the Hulk."
He pursed his lips, reached back, removed her hand from his neck, held onto it, his grip loose, uncertain.

"Natasha," he said, his voice unusually thin. "I don't want to presume, I...but I need to ask...you do understand that I, I can't..."

"I understand that you believe you can't," Natasha replied. She watched him start to open his mouth to speak before she finished her statement. "And that's enough."

Bruce pressed her hand between his fingers, let it go, took another drink.

"I hurt people," he said, looking across the room, at a small set of pine shelves, still full of children's books: shabby, beaten, spines cracked.

"So do I," said Natasha.

He stood up, moved toward the shelf, scanned it.

"It's not the same," he said.

"No," she agreed. "I hurt people on purpose. So if this is going to be some misguided narrative describing why you're not a good person..."

"You've never hurt anyone unintentionally, have you?" Bruce asked.

"I try not to," Natasha replied. "Not a one of us is always successful."

Bruce took a single volume and thumbed through it: a picture book, the colors rich, soft tones: greys, browns, greens, reds, blues with thick dark lines.

"And I've only ever hurt anyone unintentionally," said Bruce. "That might be worse."

He walked back over to her, put the book down in her lap, sat back down beside her, a little further away than before.

"It's not worse," Natasha said. "It's different."

She traced the cover of the book with her fingers: the lush jungle, the sailboat in the water, the sleeping minotaur, the thick, black letters printed above the illustration, bold and functional on white, a sharp contrast to the softness, the organic imagery, the fantastical nature.

"Where The Wild Things Are," Natasha read. "Did you want a bedtime story?"

"Not that one," said Bruce. "You can have it. Keep it. What-whatever you want."

She smoothed over the cover with both hands. "What's it about?"

"A little boy who turns into a monster when he gets angry," Bruce replied.

Natasha smiled, lowered the book to the floor, took a long drink of her wine. "Appropriate," she observed.

"This would have been easier if you'd just read Camus," Bruce replied.

"Why?" Natasha asked. "Because I'll be able to better understand how you think you're being punished in some nonsensical existentialist way?"
"Because he was my mother's favorite," Bruce said.

Natasha laughed, her voice echoing hollow and dark. "Why? With all the misogyny, the treatment of women as objects, inexplicable harm against them...the casual racism...fucking Meursault, possibly one of the most dislikeable protagonists…"

"But that--that was her life," Bruce pointed out. "There wasn't any rhyme or reason to the things my father did. He-he couldn't explain them. There's a kind of solace in someone telling you that the world doesn't make sense in cold, brutal prose."

"But there's a lack of reality in the suggestion that the world is out to get you," Natasha said.

"Her world smashed her brains out on the pavement," Bruce pointed out softly. "It wasn't exactly wrong."

Natasha didn't speak. She took both of the glasses, refilled them, handed his glass back to him, took a long drink from hers.

"I need to see him tomorrow," Bruce said.

"You always see him when you..."

Bruce nodded. "It's hard to see what he does as symptomatic of an illness, even if, logically, I know that's what it is. This...makes it easier to understand him."

"You're not him, Bruce," Natasha said.

"I know," he answered. "But he wouldn't be him, either, if he'd had some kind of treatment, maybe, sooner. He wasn't...I know he wasn't always like that, even if that's the only way I remember him."

She reached for his hand again. "All right," she said. "I'll come."

He looked up at her. "I didn't ask you to," he said. He didn't look away this time.

"You were going to," Natasha said. "You were doing what you do before you ask me something, trying to fill in the pieces, ease into it slowly."

"Do I?" he asked.

She nodded. "Every time."

He raised her hand, inspecting it, squinting at her knuckles.

"Am I always that predictable?" he asked.

"Most people are."

He raised an eyebrow as he lowered their hands. "What am I going to do next?"

"Bruce." She shook her head. "If I tell you, then you won't do it."

"The act of predicting affects the outcome?" Bruce asked.

"Behavioral science," Natasha answered. "An informed participant biases the results."

"Tell me anyway," Bruce replied.
"You were mulling over whether you should ask me to stay. You think it was my intention, but you don't know if you can ask that."

He chuckled, but he was no longer looking at her. He'd pulled her hand into his lap, caught it between both of his, was looking at it so intently that it seemed her voice must be emanating from her palm.

"And?" he asked.

"And you would have mulled it over, and not come to a decision, and acted cagey, and I would have gone back to the hotel," Natasha went on.

"I don't want that," Bruce said. He worried at her hand, sliding his fingers across her knuckles, pressing his thumb into the dip of her palm.

"You want me to stay." She flexed her fingers, opened her hand up to him, flat and broad.

He gave her a small, sheepish half-smile, matched their palms, wove his fingers through hers. "One might deduce that."

"And you can't hurt me just by sleeping next to me."

He bowed his head. "Natasha."

She loosed her hand from his, stood up. "Point me toward something I can wear to bed. Unless you want me to sleep in my underwear and potentially traumatize your aunt."

He got up after her, the cuffs of his own pajama pants trailing on the floor, and rummaged in the dresser, held out a pair of boxer shorts and a faded tee shirt. She watched him as she undressed: he sat back down on the bed, glanced at her, and then glanced away, and then met her gaze and held it.

She climbed back up next to him, peeled back the quilt on the bed, wriggled her toes down between the sheets. "Come on," she said. "Bedtime. You had a long day."

He followed suit, turned onto his side, to face her, put a thumb to her cheek. "Thank you," he said.

"I do it for everybody else," she pointed out. "I might as well do it for you, too."

"Wake me if I kick, or snore, or anything else insufferable," he said. "I'm not used to having to share."

"I'll elbow you in the ribs, how's that?"

"Perfect." He leaned forward, kissed her on the forehead, just between the eyes.
In the morning, Natasha got dressed, slipped out through Bruce’s window, and sat on the back roof of the house, read *Where The Wild Things Are* from cover to cover twice, and then studied it again, more slowly, staring at the pictures, at the tiny details of the monsters, of the land they inhabited.

She left the window open, a tiny sliver, so that when Bruce woke, she heard the old mattress springs squeak, heard feet on the floor, and she poked her head back in.

He turned as the window opened. “I wasn’t sure if you’d run off,” he said.

“I wasn’t sure how you felt about me coming downstairs,” Natasha explained.

Bruce shrugged. “I decided that if Susie’s been waiting my whole life to make rules about who I bring home, she’s been waiting my whole life to have me break them.”

He rubbed at his eyes, ran a hand through his hair to smooth it. “Oakwood’s about an hour away,” he said. “We should get moving.”
Natasha was stopped at the entry to the prison. The guard on duty clearly recognized Bruce, greeted him as he checked him in, but tilted his head, eyeing Natasha over Bruce's shoulder with a quizzical look.

Natasha displayed her badge and explained that she was Dr. Banner’s coworker, consulting as part of a psych profile required for raising his security clearance, and was given a visitor’s pass after a call to the warden's office and a signed form.

The visiting area was sparse, lit with fluorescents, cinderblocks painted a creamy off-white.

Brian Banner was smaller than she expected, no taller than Bruce, thinner, drawn-- quite unlike the man who towered, broad-shouldered and proud, over his son in the newspaper clippings. His hair had gone grey, his shoulders sloped underneath his drab sweatshirt, labeled "DRC INMATE" in large, blocky letters. He grimaced at his son as they led him in, in restraints, pulled out a chair for him across a broad table, let him sit.

Natasha stood back, arms crossed over her chest, watching as Bruce slid into a plastic-and-steel chair.

"You're back soon," Brian Banner said. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"I was in town for work, Dad," Bruce replied. "I thought I'd swing by and see how you were."

"Who’s she?" Brian asked, jutting his chin out in Natasha's direction.

“She works with me, Dad,” Bruce explained.

“Is this going to be like last time they came?” asked Brian.

“No,” said Bruce. “No tests this time. She’s just here to say hello. She wanted to meet you. Would that be alright?”

“Are you fucking her?” Brian asked, peering up at Natasha, one eye squinting. “Don’t trust females, Peanut. They’ll screw you over, get their hooks into you, make you promises they won’t-”

Bruce coughed into his hand. “Dad. Don’t worry. I know she lies. She lies for a living.” He glanced at Natasha, his eyes softened, he cupped his elbows with his hands, looked back to his father. "She's the best liar I know."

"Remember what your mother did to me," Brian said, his eyes hard on Natasha now, his squint more pronounced, his fingers tapping faster and faster against the surface of the table that separated them. "Swore up and down there'd never be a kid, and then she went and--"

Natasha crossed her arms, glared right back at Brian. "I don't have a uterus, Doctor Banner. I'm a SHIELD Agent, I'm here to observe. You can just pretend I'm not here."

He snorted, his eyes traveling slowly from her face to her hips. "Easier said than done, I'd say."

"Please don't look at my coworker like that, Dad," Bruce said, his tone controlled and even, clearly taking an effort to maintain.

"Just Like Me"
"Why not?" Brian asked. "Tell me you don't look at her like that every chance you get?"

Natasha stepped up to the table with long, loping steps, leaned forward, folded her knuckles against its surface. "He doesn't," she said smoothly. "Because somehow, you produced a son who is a decent human being. And even if he weren't, he knows that I could crush the skull of anyone I cared to, with impunity."

Brian's eyes flickered, and he gave her a thin, sneering smile. "What do you know, Peanut," he said to Bruce. "Here I was, worried that she'd be like your mother, but she's just like me."

"No, she's not," Bruce said quietly.

"Are you so sure?" Brian asked. "Lies, kills, threatens, does everything in her power to avoid getting saddled with some snotty kid who'll only get her thrown in prison, most likely? You just be careful of her."

Bruce had lowered his hands beneath the table, had one finger on his pulse.


"I wouldn't leave you in he--"

"I said, step outside," Natasha repeated.
"Miss--" one of the guards started. They were both men, both large, armed with tasers, and, she presumed, trained to deal with unruly, erratic, convict-patients.

She stood back from the table, smoothed her hair-- she'd dressed in the same clothing she'd worn to meet Aunt Susan: conservative, overtly feminine, businesslike.

The other one interrupted: he was older, some grey in his hair at the temples. "Agent," he said.

"You're free to stay," she answered. "I'm not going to murder your charge."

Brian Banner chuckled, low and hollow, shook his head. "Empty talk," he said. "You think I don't know this game, pretty? You expect me to think you're being generous by letting me live? As if you could kill me?"

Natasha slid into the seat Bruce had vacated, crossed her legs. "I don't particularly care whether you think I could kill you," she replied. "I don't plan on coming back, and I doubt it would change your lack of respect one way or another. Besides, what would I kill you for? Staring at my tits?"

"So make your threats," said Brian. "Tell me what you want to do to me. Everyone wants to, after they hear about his lying cunt of a mother."

"That was twenty-five years ago," Natasha replied. "You've been incarcerated for all that time; I hardly think you require more threats."

"I'm going to tear a leg off this table and use the ragged edge to slice your pretty face open."

She gave him a small smile, tight-lipped, a little sad. "Do you talk this way to all your visitors?"

"What visitors?" Brian asked. "It's just you and the boy."

"Your sisters?"

"Sisters? They haven't shown their faces in years. Susie brings the boy and waits in the car; that's the closest I have to sisters."

"You should try thanking him. Tell him you're glad to see him."

"What?"

"Bruce," she said. "He'll give up on you, eventually."

Brian laughed, shook his head, and for a moment, his expression was genuine, easy, lost its hardness. "No, he won't. I've tried shouting, screaming, ranting like a madman, doing nothing but talk about that cold, dead bitch. I've tried staring at the wall and saying nothing. I call him fucking 'Peanut,' treat him like he's six years old. He still comes back."

Natasha was quiet for a moment. "You don't want him here."

He smirked at her. "I could say anything I wanted to you, and he'd still come back."

"So," she asked. "You're faking? Just to get your own son to leave you alone?"

"Why would I want him here?" Brian asked. "Reminding me that he made me kill the only
woman I ever loved?"

"He was a child."

"He was a monster," Brian said. "He's still a monster. Don't think I don't know it. He made me do it, you--"

Natasha leveled her gaze, leaned forward on her elbows. "He loves you," she replied. "He saw what you did, but he keeps coming back, and you're...what? Letting him believe you're worse off than you are? If you don't want him here, you could tell him so and let him leave you in peace."

"Look me in the eye and tell me you've never pretended to be something you're not, Agent," said Brian. "He's the same. He tries so hard to hide it. He's so good, so very, very good. Visiting his sick father. Taking care of impoverished children in India. Helping SHIELD or whatever you shits are calling yourselves now. So good. Because he's trying so hard to prove he's something he's not."

"But it's his actions that matter, Doctor."

Brian snorted. "Fuck me, you sound like that Stark bitch."

Natasha blinked. "Maria Stark?"

"Only female who's ever bothered to visit me in this hellhole," Brian answered. "Before you, that is. And the two of you are fucking peas in a pod."

"Interesting," Natasha replied. "And she threatened you."

"As much as a little cunt like that can be a threat," said Brian. "She came to see me about the boy, never mind she hadn't seen him since he was a baby..."

"She made you put Bruce on your list of approved visitors," Natasha replied.

Brian was quiet, his expression stony. "How'd you--?"

Natasha shot him a smirk, stood up from her chair, laid her palms against the table.

"Thank you for your cooperation."

She let the door swing shut with a slam when she left.
"He was better today," Bruce said, during the ride back, in the car loaned by SHIELD. "Better than he was at Christmas. He...he was almost unresponsive then, they had me worried."

Natasha sat, staring at the road ahead, tight-lipped.

"I'm sorry he was so...I should have realized," Bruce said. "He was out of line."

Natasha shook her head. "Bruce. I’ve heard worse. But I don't think you should be going there."

"He's sick," Bruce said. "I--it's no picnic to deal with, but it isn't any different from if he had a physical illness that kept him bedridden. It's not his fault."

He took a breath.

"Nothing he's done is his fault. It's the sickness."

She wanted to ask him at what point the sickness and the man were the same thing, but every scenario she could project ended with Bruce being hurt.

"It might not be his fault," Natasha said softly. "But if he had smallpox, you wouldn't expose yourself to it."

Bruce was quiet for a long time.

"I'll think about it," he said.

That was the last thing either of them said for the rest of the ride.
Slipped Away, Turned a Corner

Natasha made her farewells to Aunt Susan, followed a chain of contacts who were finally able to give her a phone number to call Jen, and checked in to make sure she was alright, and took down her new phone number, new temporary mailing address for Bruce, and a cover story for Aunt Susan.

Bruce buried his head against her shoulder when he dropped her off at the airport. She clasped her arms around him, slipped her hands over his shoulder blades.

“I can change my flight,” she offered. “There’s still time.”

“Two days,” he said. “I'll be in New York in two days.”

"Two days," Natasha agreed. She pressed her nose up against the fabric of his shirt, briefly, then stepped away, smoothing out the sleeves of his shirt, before their embrace could appear as something other than friendly to anyone who might review security footage.

As she lifted her head, she saw, out of the corner of her eye, a figure leaning back against a wall, eyes on her, not even disguising the fact that he was watching.

If she hadn't recognized him instantly: dark hair, dark coat, the light reflecting off the fingertips that peeked out past his coat sleeves were a dead giveaway. She went still, still enough that Bruce turned, just as the man seemed to notice her watching, slipped away, turned a corner.

"Are you all right?” he asked.

Natasha pointed with a little jut of her chin.

"Did you see that?” she asked.

"What?” Bruce said, squinting in the path the man had taken. "That girl who looked like you?"

"Girl?"

"What were you looking at?" asked Bruce. "I assumed it was--you didn't see her? She was a dead ringer."

Natasha shook her head, rolled her shoulders. "No,” she answered. "I was looking at..."

She winced as she trailed off. "We're being watched," she said. "Or maybe just me. Likely just me."

Bruce snatched at her hands. "It's not too late to change your flight," he reminded her.

She shook her head. "I've got Clint and Steve back at the Tower if it's anything I can't handle on my own."

She smiled tiredly at him. "And you know I'd only send you to get more coffee."

He pressed her hand one more time before letting it go.
She got in the door to the sound of shouting, one-sided shouting. "No!" Steve snapped into the phone. "You can't just--take advantage of SHIELD resources when you want them, and then--"

Natasha dropped her bag, plunked herself on the couch, where Clint was watching Steve pace rapidly across the floor, barefoot, shirtless, in ill-fitting jeans that did his perfect musculature no favors. Clint seemed mesmerized, like a cat watching a giant aquarium.

"Stark?" Natasha asked, her voice lowered. She dropped herself down, lying in Clint's lap, and Clint tangled his fingers in her hair, began massaging her scalp.

"And we sent you an agent!" Steve snapped. "SHIELD directly countermanded orders on your behalf, and you're...just quitting?"


"Someone has to take Steve shopping," she lamented. "Why the fuck couldn't Stark buy him clothes for Christmas?"

"Or just forbid him from wearing clothes," Clint suggested, looking appreciatively at Steve's back.

"I do not need that walking around my living room naked," Natasha muttered.

"You do realize," Steve said to the phone,"that after everything that happened over Christmas, the minute you leave the Initiative, the government's going to try to regulate you again."

"But it's so pretty," said Clint.

"But it has a crush on me," Natasha pointed out. "And we are not--"

"Maybe you're not," said Clint. "Why can't he have a crush on me instead?"

"No traumatizing the Captain, Clint," Natasha said. "Remember?"

"Aw, I thought that was a one-time thing."

"It is a one-time thing," Natasha replied. "In perpetuity."

"Spoilsport," said Clint.

Steve cut himself off, mid-argument, and glared at the phone.

"Stark, are you even there?"

"Stark?"

"Dammit," he said, and turned around. "He hung up. Widow," he said, nodding at her. "How was Dayton?"

"I got Banner's cousin set up with SHIELD," she said. "It should be alright, as long as they can work with her to reduce the incidents."
She took a breath, squeezed Clint's leg. "I saw Bobbi," she said.

He twitched. "Yeah?"

"Stark quit," said Steve, dropping the phone onto the coffee table with a clatter. He sat down on Natasha's other side, arms crossed over his chest, his lower lip turned out far enough that Natasha decided that Captain America was, indeed, pouting.

“So?” asked Clint. “Stark quits like every other Thursday.”

“Really quit,” said Steve. “I had to call him about the paperwork for Christmas and he tells me he’s going into surgery.”

“What?” asked Clint.

“Surgery. Quadruple-bypass-heart surgery.”

“Surgery, like, when they cut you open, surgery? What?” asked Clint. "Why? Is he-"

"He wants to take out the arc reactor," Steve said. "He...said something about letting go of things, some bullshit about masks."

"Colonel Rhodes pilots a suit," Natasha said. "Vanko. Stane. I know Pepper's at least had cursory instruction. He doesn't need the reactor to power the suit, and he knows that."

"His file says he almost died from radiation poisoning because of the old reactor," Steve said. "Why...why would he do that to himself if he could just pop it out?"

"That was three years ago," Natasha said. "Maybe he couldn't, then."

"Who cares?" asked Clint. "It's one more way to be difficult. We all know he can't stay away from the suit."

"He can stay away from the Initiative," Steve pointed out. "And losing Iron Man does nothing for us--I'm considering our public image; he's the one who's built up goodwill in the public eye. People think of me as a comic book character, the two of you are covert ops, the public is terrified of the Hulk no matter what Banner does--they're terrified and grateful, but still terrified."

"We can find someone else," Clint said. "Someone who isn't such a--"

"He can't stay away," said Natasha. "But Steve...he's not trained for this. No matter how big his guns, he's just an ordinary man in a fancy suit. He isn't particularly skilled at combat"--she looked at Clint--"or particularly strong." She looked at Steve. "He’s learned a lot, and in the suit he’s practically unmatchable, but he was without a suit for a lot of what happened at Christmas. I don't blame him."

"It's an unnecessary risk," said Steve, who glowered at the black, unilluminated television screen.

"Are you angry at him for quitting?" Natasha asked quietly. She sat up straight, pulling herself out of Clint's lap, and put a hand on Steve's knee. "Or worried about what might happen to him?"

Steve clenched his teeth. "Why would I be worried?" He asked. "He's Tony Fucking Stark; everything always goes his way."

He wriggled away from her, stood up. "I'm going for a ride," he muttered, combing a hand through his hair.
"Remember a shirt," said Clint. "You don't want to be responsible for a fifty-car pileup."

Steve glared at Clint for a moment.

"And shoes," Clint added cheerily. "Can't forget the shoes."

Steve kicked at the door jamb as he left the room.

"How's Bobbi?" Clint asked, reaching for Natasha's hand.

"Good," said Natasha. "That is, I didn't speak to her much; she took Banner's cousin to a safehouse, but...she looked good. Seemed good."

Clint hesitated, grinding his teeth into his lower lip. "Happy-good?"

Natasha sighed and kissed Clint's cheek. "Don't punish yourself," she said. "Healthy. Capable of doing her job. I told her you were good, too."

"She asked?"

"Of course she asked," Natasha lied.

"I ran into that girl again," said Clint. "At Argo. You'd swear they were twins, Nat. Argo-girl, like, the only difference was that she's got her hair, like, shoulder-length, with those side-bangs, like Bobbi's was back when we met. Otherwise, spitting image. It's shit, Nat. Absolute shit."

"I know," Natasha said. She leaned back against him. "It gets better, you know. You'll stop seeing..."

And then she stopped, and took a breath.

"You okay?" Clint asked.

"Yes," Natasha replied. "But I think your Bobbi lookalike is following you."

"Uh. Nat?" Clint asked. "Not that that wouldn't be a great way to get in my head, but...seems a little far-fetched, doesn't it?"

"We've been attacked by aliens. We live with a Hulk. I don't think anything is far-fetched, anymore."

And then she told Clint what she'd been seeing.

"So what do we do about it?" Clint asked, when she was finished.

"Nothing yet," Natasha said. "Gather information. If we act too quickly, we don't find out who it is or what they want. Just... watch. Try to make sense of when we see them." She shrugged. "You could try flirting a little."

Clint shuddered. "That's creepy, Nat. 'Hey, I couldn't help but notice you look just like my ex-wife, wanna go back to my place?'"

"I said flirt, not sleep with. I think whoever it is is trying to creep us. Throw us off-guard. If we don't seem off-guard, it might help."

"Right," Clint said. "Okay."
"And we need to...I'll talk to Steve and Bruce. Make sure they know, too."

Clint stared at her. “Shit,” he said. “You think that’s what’s wrong with Steve.”

“He’s been too angry for this to just be Stark,” Natasha agreed.

“So Steve’s seeing Peggy Carter walking around and not telling any of us?” Clint asked.

"Something like that," Natasha agreed.
Too Many Peppers

Steve's frustration bled through to his cooking, and the next morning, Natasha arrived in the kitchen to the spiciest omelette she'd ever eaten, stuffed to the gills with green chilies, pepper jack cheese, Tabasco sauce, onions. She scarfed it with three glasses of ice water, watched Steve scrub the pan as if it had committed a mortal offense.

"The rest of us don't just up and leave whenever we want," Steve said, not exactly directing his statement at Natasha, but at the walls, cabinets, refrigerator. "Does he think we don't ever want to? That we like being stuck like this?"

"He's around so infrequently, I don't think he could know," said Natasha.

"He should know," Steve replied, laying the skillet out to dry before he sat down to his own meal. He set out two mugs of hot cocoa, laced with cinnamon, cardamom, orange peel. "But he thinks he's special, doesn't he?"

"He is special," Natasha pointed out, and she lifted her mug, letting the steam play over her face, inhaling the scents of chocolate and spices. "He's very possibly the smartest person I know, certainly in the top ten. He's extraordinarily wealthy, and uses his livelihood to do good things for the entire world, when he doesn't have to do that."

"Steve," she said, after a moment, watching his jab at his eggs with a fork. "You know this isn't about Stark."

He stuffed a forkful of omelette in his mouth, chewed, swallowed. "I'm supposed to be the team leader, and I don't even have a team."

"What you mean to say is that you don't have Stark. You have me," Natasha said. "Clint. Bruce. Thor."

"Thor's on some godforsaken other planet," Steve pointed out. "And Banner won't fight."

"If things look bad enough that we need him to, he will."

Steve gave her an uncertain look, and prodded at his omelette some more. "I think I used too many peppers," he admitted.

"Stark will, too."

Steve raised an eyebrow. "Think I used too many peppers?" he asked, his tone dry, without inflection.

"You're talking about a man who took down a terrorist organization formed out of exploding soldiers," Natasha pointed out. "With extremely limited support. Because they hurt his friend. I know so."

Steve put down his fork, lay his hands on the table. "Why are you perfect?" he asked, as he picked up his mug.

Natasha snorted "Because you're still too young. Tell me about Bucky."

Steve sprayed cocoa across the table. "You know about Bucky," he said, when he recovered. "He's in my file."
Natasha handed Steve a napkin; he started wiping down the table, then dabbing at the brown specks on his tee shirt.

"I know enough about Bucky to know there's something that wasn't in your file," she said. "You thought you saw him, in Florence."

"It happens," Steve said. "A lot, since he died. He had one of those faces, you know?"

Natasha nodded. "I know," she answered. "I feel the same way about somebody."

Steve frowned, looked at her for a long moment, nodded. "It wasn't..."

Natasha stood up, picked up her mug. "It never is, with you, is it?"

Steve sniffed, then risked another sip of cocoa. "I just figure, you know, I have good taste, always falling for people who are out of my league."

"You have excellent taste," Natasha assured him. "But nobody’s out of your league, Steve. Do me a favor and rate yourself a little higher? You're Captain America, for fuck's sake."

"Yeah, well, I don't like to rest on my laurels," said Steve.

He shook his head, started clearing his dishes. "Definitely too many peppers."

"Steve?" Natasha said, before she turned to go. "Tell me if you think you see him again, would you?"

Steve was quiet for a moment, ran his fingers through his hair. "Yeah," he agreed. "I assume you've got a reason you're not telling me, but yeah. I will."
Between the omelettes with too many peppers one morning and light, fluffy waffles with strawberries and chocolate syrup the next, it was clear Steve's mood had lightened considerably. In the meantime, Natasha and Clint had rescued twenty hostages from a human trafficking ring in the middle of the Atlantic and terrified two congressmen out of running for office ever again, after their ties to the Mandarin conspiracy seemed too great to be mere coincidence.

The latter of these missions had required that she wear six-inch heels and an extremely uncomfortable bra, and the first thing she did after breakfast was slide into a steaming hot bubble bath.

She had turned on music-- Dvorak's Ninth Symphony-- and had just gotten comfortable, eyes half-lidded, with another book from Bruce’s shelves in Dayton--*The Hero and the Crown*--when her phone played “Mr. Roboto.”

She sighed, put down the book, picked up the phone. "Tin Man?" she asked. "I hear the Wizard finally gave you a heart."

Stark laughed appreciatively, if weakly. "Just wanted to let you know I'd come through. There's... fuck, Nat, I'm spending the next couple of months in and out of surgery, but the worst of it's done."

"You should call Steve," she said. "He was worried."

"So he can shout at me again?" Stark asked. "They told me no strenuous activity for... well...a while. That's why I was calling you; I hoped you could relay it to the team?"

"Of course I will," Natasha said.

"I've been thinking, Nat," said Stark. "Once this is all over and done with, I was still thinking I might come to New York... for a while."

"Steve told me you quit," Natasha told him.

"I did," Stark replied. "I'm not... well, it's a moot point at the moment, considering I'm going to be under the knife on and off for a while, but I'll still be consulting for SHIELD. That's where the actual money is. Government contracts are like gold. So. Just to visit. If you can, uh, float the idea around, see what everyone says?"

"Are you going to lock Barton out of the Tower again?" Natasha asked. "Because at the moment, I can predict everyone's reactions, and not including me, you have one positive and two negatives."

"So you'll be the tiebreaker?" Stark asked cheerfully. "Thanks, Nat, I owe you one. Look, I've got to go; Pepper's having a hell of a time with this hospital and their list of quote-unquote-forbidden items. Just... say hello to Brucey? His cousin's okay?"

"She's fine. Yes," Natasha said.

"No, no, listen," said Stark, and it took Natasha a moment to realize that he'd neglected to say goodbye or hang up the phone, and that she was listening in as he attempted to explain the necessity of having one-hundred-proof scotch in a hospital to a rather impatient nurse.
So she sighed and hung up, sunk beneath the surface for a moment, holding her breath with her cheeks puffed out like a blowfish, popped back out, and went back to her book.

JARVIS interrupted her bath just as Aerin had slain the dragon.

“Agent Romanova, Doctor Banner is outside your door,” the AI informed her.

“Tell him to come in; I’ll be out in a minute.”

She stepped into the living room in Clint’s tee shirt and her own pajama pants, hair still dripping, book in one hand, her index finger slid between the pages to keep her place.

Bruce was standing, facing the sofa, wavering slightly, as if he was determining whether to sit. He still had his backpack with him, he dropped it to the floor at the sound of her bare feet padding on the carpet, turned around.

His eyes went to the book in her hand, and he smiled. “How is it, so far?”

“Interesting,” she said, and she dropped. “The story really starts where most stories end. She just defeated the dragon. But...there’s obviously a lot more book left to read.”

He smiled, a tired smile, his eyes shuttering slightly.

She moved toward the kitchenette, pulled down two glasses, began to fill them with water. “Sit,” she said.

He plunked down onto the sofa, a little unsteady, as if it were the force of gravity pulling him down more than his own will.

“How’s Jen?” she asked, handing him one glass before she sat down beside, pulling her feet up across her knees.

“Jen’s...” Bruce squinted at his water, swirling it around, as if he was looking at something in it. “Surprisingly normal.”

He took a sip.

“I feel...it’s a hard thing to describe. Conflicted.”

“Over the apprehension that you’ve perhaps cursed someone being at odds with the fact that they may not regard it as a curse, after all?” Natasha asked. She glanced at the book, drank her water down in one long, continuous gulp, put the glass on the floor.

He glanced sidelong at her, sitting a little too straight, hands on his knees, and let out an appreciative snort. “Something like that,” he agreed.

Natasha pulled her knees up to her chest, sat in a ball, as small as she could be. “Susie?” she asked.

He took a breath, quiet for a moment. “She...what do you say?” he asked. “Sorry, Auntie, I’m a monster?”

“She must know something,” Natasha said.

She watched him, the way his spine slumped with exhaustion, the way his eyes weren’t quite focusing, and tugged, gently at his shirtsleeve, removing his arm just enough that she could lean toward him, rest her head in his lap.
He put down his water, his shoulders curled toward her, he slid a single finger through her hair, rested it in the hollow behind her ear.

“She knows something’s wrong, yeah,” said Bruce. “But she thinks it’s all tied to Jen. Jen’s gotten herself in trouble before, takes the do-good lawyer thing a little too far with the wrong people.”

“Well, maybe now they won’t do that anymore,” Natasha said. “Once they figure out she’s the wrong people.”

“I don’t know how she does it,” Bruce said. “Just...takes it in stride, so easy.”

Natasha shrugged. “I don’t think the Other Guy is the only thing you’re talking about.”

She could feel him draw in a sharp breath.

“I meant it...what I said the other night,” he said quietly.

He didn’t move his hand.

“You don’t have to explain yourself, Doc,” said Natasha. She sat up, slid closer, leaned her cheek against his shoulder. “Not for my benefit.”

He picked his water glass back up.

“I--maybe am not doing it for you.”
Natasha slipped out of the car, opened the back door, leaned in to talk directly to Bruce, handed him an earpiece. "You remember how to wear this?" she asked.

"Yeah," he said, fitting it into his ear, flicking the dial on. "Is that loud enough?" His voice surrounded her.

"Perfect," she said. "I don't think we'll need much, just...precautionary measure."

He looked up at her, got out of the car, let his fingers graze against the back of her hand as he stepped toward the drivers' seat. "Two hours?"

"Shouldn't be more than one," she said, and she hooked his pinky with her own as he passed, just lightly, just for a moment. "Have the car ready to go, just in case."

"I'll keep the motor running," Bruce answered.

Natasha nodded, then jogged away to catch up with Clint.

"Banner okay?" Clint asked, as he sized up the sleepy small-town street: a post office, a bank, the Town Hall, all in a single block, all the doors and windows shuttered late at night. Natasha could see his eyes flicking: to windows, to rooftops, to hundred-year-old trees.

"Just getting him set up for communication," Natasha replied. "I usually don't bother when I send him for coffee."

"I'd just like to point out that I did hear that," Bruce's voice said into her ear, in a cheery tone.

"Hear what?" Natasha replied.

"Ooh, Banner Banter," said Clint. "I'm sorry. That was bad."

"I might forgive you," Bruce assured him.

Natasha flicked off her earpiece for a moment, nodded to Clint to do the same.

"HYDRA?" he mouthed. She nodded.

"Live cell," she explained. "But they've got some old tech, a whole cache of it, stuff supposedly left over from World War Two. Fury wants it gone. Obviously don't want Banner anywhere near it. And as long as we're supposed to be keeping this from Cap..."

Clint nodded.

There were six guards- the presence of six men loitering outside the fallout shelter entrance between the stately old bank and the quaint post office from another era in a tiny town that had all but been abandoned for the suburbs should have been a sign to anyone, but no one was out so late at night in a town like this. Clint fired an explosive arrow, not at the main entrance, but several dozen yards off. They split up: three rushed off toward the explosion site, three remained at the door.

Three were few enough for Natasha to dispatch neatly; she grabbed an ID from one of the fallen guards, used the man's badge and his thumbprint to gain access.
"I'm in," she said.

"I'm on my way," Clint told her, and she headed toward their rendezvous spot, well clear of the explosion Clint had instigated.

He caught up, an arrow already notched in his bow. The interior of the fallout shelter seemed the stretch the length of the entire block. It was cluttered, claustrophobic, maze-like, lit by incandescent bulbs bare in ceiling fixtures, cramped by giant old file cabinets, stamp dispensers, desks and chairs.

"If they're hiding some kind of genius ageless tech, they're not using it for power," Clint observed.

One of the bulbs dimmed and re-lit, as if in response.

The attack came from both directions at once, forcing Natasha and Clint to fight back to back, before wedging them apart, and within a matter of minutes, Natasha found herself up against a dead end: a cinderblock wall, no windows. She turned, set her back to the wall, found herself inundated with assailants.

"Doc, you copy?" She asked, as she fought back the attackers. "I need you to move. Just...drive. I need you out of here."

"Copy, Widow," came the garbled reply.

She drove her elbow into a man's face, cracked his head with her spent pistol.

The hallway was empty, littered with bodies, but, for the moment, still. Natasha took a breath and reloaded her pistol.

How someone had gotten behind her, she would never know. But fingers -- cold, metal fingers -- clasped her shoulder, whirled her around so fast she nearly stumbled.

He was so close that her heart felt like lead; she wanted to press herself to him and tell him to come with her this time.

"This is a trap," he said. "You need to get out."

"You're not him," Natasha observed, and she took a small step back.

He shook his head.

"I don't suppose 'Who are you' is going to merit me much of an answer?"

He tilted his head to one side, regarding her thoughtfully, and his dark eyes locked on hers, intensely, but the sense of recognition was slim, and she flinched.

"Only because I'm not much of anyone," he said, finally.

"You've been following us."

And he laughed, laughed with his head tipped back, his mouth pointed heavenward.

"I'm not following you," he said. "I'm following HYDRA. You just keep getting to them first."

The man who looked like the Winter Soldier took a step forward, flung a hand out, and a cloud of black fog materialized where there had been none before. It hovered, nebulous, for barely a moment before taking form into a tiny, compact black bullet that hurtled forward.
She had a split second to respond. She leapt to the side, narrowly missed the man behind her as he fired his own gun—a huge, ancient-looking thing that looked unsettlingly like the Phase Two weapons she’d seen aboard the Helicarrier.

The gun, as it fired, illuminated the room, flickering blue and gold, a hole in the opposite wall with a blast radius as large as her body. Her breath caught in her throat, she whirled on her assailant, and saw him crumpled on the floor, a neat hole in the center of his head, wisps of black mist clearing the area.

"Nat?!” Clint exclaimed, as his feet fell, quick against the concrete floors. They stopped, close, suddenly, and she heard him suck in a breath. "Bobbi?"

"That's not Bobbi," Natasha replied.

Clint raised his bow.

"But whoever they are," Natasha said, staring at the person who looked too painfully familiar, "they saved my life. I think."

Clint relaxed the bow, but kept his arrow notched. "What do you want?" He asked.

"I want HYDRA cut into so many tiny pieces that none of their fucking heads ever grow back."

"Yeah, so...you have a more powerful organization than SHIELD backing you up?"

"SHIELD is no better than another head of the same damn beast. And you're in the wrong place. They wanted you here, you left your driver, don't you—"

Natasha's breath caught in her throat. "Banner," she said, over her shoulder, feeling a scratch in her throat, and set off running.

"Doc?" She murmured, but there was no response. "Doc, if you're there, I need your status."

She skidded to a halt outside; the car was empty, the window smashed, glass scattered on the pavement.

But the light on the main floor of the post office was on, the door swung ajar.

"As much as I'd like to believe these assholes are idiots," Clint said, as he caught up to her,"I think that's intended as an invitation."

Natasha nodded. "See if you can get a clear shot through any of the windows. I'm going in."

Clint was already racing across the street, toward the park.
She took the stairs three at a time, up the front steps in two bounds, into the main lobby of the post office.

It was one of those strange, disjointed interiors: a granite floor, beautifully carved wood counters, old iron railings, with modern, functional postage machines that looked out of place in the midst of that grandeur. Brass PO boxes lined one wall, and a block of newer, drab grey boxes had been installed near the door. The elegant counter had, at some point, been fitted with a plexiglass security window, scuffed and discolored by age.

There were eight of them: their masks obscuring all but their eyes and mouths. Enough to make this a tricky proposition. Tricky, yet doable.

Except that in the center of the room, two of them were holding Bruce, tied to a chair, his head forced down against a countertop full of international mailing forms, another enormous gun pressed against his temple.

If Natasha hadn't been so occupied with determining how to kill all eight of her opponents without damaging the historic architecture, she might have laughed.

Instead, her expression was a practiced blank, her battle mask. She gave Bruce only the barest of glances before fixing her gaze on the woman at the center.

The woman cracked a smile. "I would have thought SHIELD could spare one of its newest darlings an actual agent," she said, amusement ringing in her voice.

"What makes you think he's not an agent?" Natasha asked carefully.

The woman in front of her chuckled. "You think we haven't been watching? Seen the reports? You do the heavy lifting; you send your assistant--" and with this, she threw his identification on the floor-- "Doctor Banner, doctor of what, I don't know, to get coffee or do your dry cleaning."

Bruce cleared his throat. "Th-the dry cleaning was only once," he said.

"And he cracks jokes," said the woman. "Congratulations. You have an incompetent sidekick. You might as well be starring in a buddy cop flick."

"Nat," Clint's voice murmured in her ear. "Nat, there's shit in front of all these windows; I can't get a clear shot."

"Copy that," Natasha replied softly.

"What do you want?" she asked the woman. "You want something. Otherwise you'd have tried to kill us by now."

"The hell is Banner doing?" Clint asked. "He could have flattened these assholes."

"Shh," said Natasha.

"Weapons down," said the woman.

Natasha propped her guns on a postage dispenser.
"And the bracelets," the woman said, nodding at Natasha's Widow's Bite.

"I think I'll be keeping those, if it's all the same to you," Natasha replied.

"Fair enough," said the woman. "One false move, we shoot the doctor."

"I'd like to see you try."

The woman chuckled. "Tell your friend on the roof to stand down.

Natasha tensed. "Stand down, Barton."

"You know, Banner could help us out here," Clint muttered. "Any minute."

"Turn that radio off, while you're at it."

Natasha took a breath, then removed the earpiece. "Doc," she said to Bruce. "I'm going to get you out of this."

"Leave me," said Bruce. "I can take care of myself."

The woman chuckled. "And you sound so convincing," she said.

"I think we can dispense with the taunts," Natasha replied. "We're here to do business. What's yours?"


"You understand that if I give them to you, I leave this place and call in, don't you?" Natasha asked. "You'd have access for all of five minutes."

The woman smiled. "That's all we need."

Natasha hesitated, looked to Bruce again.

"I have SHIELD access to Level Eleven," Natasha replied. "I can get you Stark Tower. I just need to--"

"You'll need to hurry," the woman said, with a sneer.

Natasha instantly realized what the woman was implying in that statement. She leapt forward even as the pistol went off--raising her fist to fire the Widow's Bite--

But the gun fired first, and Bruce's shoulders jerked violently, and his watch beeped. Natasha stepped-- first back, instinctively, then forward, with a surge of adrenaline that made her arms tingle.

His watch beeped again, and a third time, in quicker succession now.

The armed men and women fell into a tight circle around them, clearly unaware of what was about to happen.

"Hydrogen," she said, slowly, carefully.

Bruce looked up at her, his eyes flooding with green even as the spot on his shirt darkened and spread, purple-red on white cotton.
"Hydrogen," he rasped, but she could hear the deepening growl in his voice, see his skin tingling grey-green.

The leader of...whoever these people were...cackled, clearly mistaking Bruce's condition for shock.

His watch beeped faster.


Sweat beaded on his brow; his lip trembled; his jaw squared.

"He...helium," he managed.

His watch sounded in an unbroken stream of high-pitched wailing.

He didn't make it to lithium.

The watchband strained and snapped, throwing the still-ringing watch spinning across the room, where it spiderwebbed a windowpane and ricocheted back, now silent as it caught a man in the cheek.

She anticipated his lunge before he'd fully transformed; she dodged the massive green fist by inches, rolling across the floor as Bruce roared and grasped the throat of the man who'd been immediately behind her, crushing his windpipe.

The others in the room opened fire on Bruce. Natasha snatched up a metal stool by its legs as she righted herself in a crouching position, swung it at the nearest attacker, sent him crashing to the ground in a salvo that caught two of his compatriots in the line of fire.

Natasha tried to make eye contact with Bruce, but there was no flicker of recognition from across the room, where he batted at fully armed warriors as if they were rag dolls. She felt her own pulse quicken.

"Boron, carbon, nitrogen oxygen," she whispered to herself.

A man came at her with a fire hatchet, pulled from its glass safety case on the wall. She stepped back, aimed her wrist--

And he fell forward, an arrow in his back.

"Fuck's sake," said Clint, as he shot another. "I can't leave you alone for one minute without everything going to shit."

He stole a look at Bruce, just as Bruce let out a feral roar.

"Hulk's not playing on our side, I take it?" Clint asked.

Natasha shook her head brusquely.

"Fluorine, neon, sodium, magnesium," she muttered under her breath as she shot a woman in the head.

And as she turned, she saw the leader of the group slip out the door, tossing a small, metallic item behind her.

"Clint!" Natasha shouted. "Bomb!"
As the building exploded around them, Natasha rolled beneath a table; the building crashed down around her and left her half-blinded by dust.

Natasha turned her earpiece back on.

"Barton?" She murmured. She tried to crawl forward, but she was wedged into the space: one wall, behind her, stood intact, while the roof had collapsed on the other side of the desk, effectively burying her.

She coughed, feeling around with a hand, half-blind with the dust, and found a narrow space where the floor had collapsed.

Squeezing her way back into the cellar, through splintered wood and crumbling concrete, seemed a safer bet.

Some fallout shelter, she thought, as her feet hit the floor below.

The power had gone out; the dim incandescents past the tear in the floor were dark.

She found the wall, put a hand to it, sliding her palm across the cinder blocks in the direction of the door.

"Clint," she said, with more urgency. "Do you copy?"

And then she heard the rumbling footsteps behind her, the sound of the floor cracking under the weight of a twelve-hundred-pound beast.

She sucked in a deep breath, walked quickly and quietly, hoped she wouldn't catch his attention.

The concrete grated rough against her fingers; the thundering footsteps grew closer.

And he roared.

She ran, and narrowly missed his fist as it crashed through the cinderblock wall.

Her heart pounded in her chest; she could feel her throat constrict, her fingers grow cold, her spine tingle. It felt too much like the Helicarrier, the darkness, the narrow space, the knowledge that the only thing she could do was run, the certainty of what would happen if she didn't run fast enough.

His breath was hot on her neck, and he breathed in great, ragged gulps. He was too close; unlike the helicarrier, there was nothing to duck behind, climb up--file cabinets and old desks were no protection.

She knew that if he reached again, he would catch her.

She took one last breath, swallowed, shut her eyes and spun on her heel.

She opened her eyes.

He was three, two paces away.

She had no weapons. None that she could use against him.

"When the Dark comes rising, six shall turn it back!" she shouted at him.

He skidded to a halt, his enormous feet digging up tracks in the floor.
"Clint," Natasha murmured. "Clint, if you copy, I need you..."

The Hulk roared at her, batted a hand out, smacked her to the floor, her left side smarting where he'd made contact.

"Three for the-- okay, not that one. At Tara in this fateful hour, I place all heaven with its power..."

Gingerly, she pushed herself up.

“Only in silence the word, only in dark the light, only in dying life: bright the hawk's flight on the empty sky.”

The Hulk snarled at her, but stayed where he was. She squared her shoulders, set her feet apart, felt her hand twitch as she calculated the speed it would take to strike the Hulk in the eye with the Widow's Bite.

“Where 'tis all a hole, sir, Never can be holes: why should their shoes have soles, sir, when they've got no souls? 'But she upon her foot, sir, Has a granite shoe: The strongest leather boot, sir, Six would soon be through.’”

The Hulk roared at her.

She roared back. Her voice was reedy and thin, had no weight compared to his.

But he went silent.

“Car...bon?” he suggested, his voice hesitant.


“Fluorine,” he added. “Neon.”

She took a deep breath.

"Bruce," she said, her voice faltering as she spoke. "Bruce, Clint was upstairs. And I can't get through to him. I need help."

She heard a low rumble come from his throat.

"Hawkeye?" the Hulk asked.

"Yeah," said Natasha. "Please."

The Hulk motioned with his hands over his head protectively. “Hide head.”

Natasha crouched down, guarding her head with her arms.

The Hulk slammed a fist through the ceiling, concrete and wood and insulation raining down, bruising Natasha's arms.

The Hulk offered an enormous hand to her. "Go up," he said. "Hulk follow."

Her neck and shoulders tensed, but she took hold of his massive arm, fit an entire foot into the hollow of his palm. Her knees went weak, her fingers trembled, but the Hulk lifted her through the hole into the upper post office, the floor littered with the dead.
Clint was sitting on the floor, a large purpling bruise on his forehead.

Clint laughed weakly at Natasha’s approach. "Nat?" He asked. "Status?"

"A little bruised," she said, as she stepped forward.

"You... God, Nat, your face..."

"You look worse," Natasha said.

“I’ve got a hard head,” Clint insisted. “Nat, what happened to--”

She touched her cheek, felt the swelling, winced. "It's all right," she said. "We've figured it out."

Clint, limping, stepped forward, wrapped an arm around her, careful of her bruises, but protective.

"You figured what..."

The Hulk climbed up after her, grunting, as more of the floor fell away under his weight. Clint's arm tensed around her; he pulled her back, but the Hulk stood there, quietly eyeing them.

"Hulk calm," explained the Hulk.

"Riiight..." said Clint. "You just...do that."

"Doc?" Natasha tried. "You want to help us get out? You can stay here, and I'll get your clothes."

The Hulk let out a low grumble, then lumbered toward the pile of wreckage blocking the door, and kicked it away, scattering debris and dust around the room. "Hulk stay," he agreed.

"Well, thanks." Clint still squinted suspiciously at him as he steered Natasha away.

Natasha heard a creak, a clatter, and a loud thump, and she glanced over her shoulder as the Hulk sat down, legs crossed, hooking his hands around his toes, like a child.

She left Clint at the door to the building, to keep watch, just in case, and headed off toward the car.

Out of her peripheral vision, she caught the shape of a man moving in the shadows. His silhouette was familiar, but there was something about his motion that seemed wrong; he moved with more fluidity, more like a dancer or an acrobat than like the assassin she remembered.

She considered going after him, but he turned back, well down the street by now, and where at first she thought she saw a flash of metal, a blur of red paint, she found herself looking at a young woman with black hair, in an oversized black sweater: the young woman from Asbury Park.

And then she saw the note on the hood.

*Sorry I couldn’t help more. I’ve gotta be careful about my cover. --T*

She frowned, glanced up at the woman, and watched her walk to the corner and turn out of sight.

Natasha rummaged in the trunk, found Bruce's spare clothing, turned back toward the building.

"Nat?" Clint asked, stumbling as he pulled himself up from the stairs. "You want me to--"
Natasha shook her head, "it has to be me. He needs to know I still trust him."

"Nat?" Clint's voice was sharp; it pitched up as he spoke. "I need to know you're okay with this."

She kissed his cheek. "I love you," she said. "If I wasn't okay with it, I wouldn't do it."

He stroked her chin with his thumb, kissed her back, and let her go. "Twenty minutes," he warned. "I'll be waiting."
Natasha walked back up the steps, clutching Bruce's clothes to her chest, and stood at the entryway, hesitating.

"Bruce?" She tried. "Bruce, I'm back."

He appeared in the doorway, tugging his now-stretched-out trousers up.

She held out the pile of clothing, and his shoulders collapsed with relief.

"Let me in," she said, and he stepped back, nearly tripping over a prone body.

She followed him, and as they moved into the open space of the post office, she saw him look at her bruised face and wince visibly.

"It's nothing, Doc," she said. "Part of the job."

But he stepped up to her, still in his stretched-out rags, and slid a thumb over the bruise on her cheek.

"Did I do that?" he asked quietly.

"He did," Natasha replied, seeing no reason to lie. "But we were able to reach an agreement."

His brow creased, deeply; his lips curved downward.

"Bruce," she said. "This isn't--it's not the same. This is an occupational hazard. I get paid with this in mind. I have entire investments--millions of dollars in the bank-- for dealing with things like this."

"But you're..." He said, and then went quiet, turning his back to her as he dressed.

"No," she said. "I'm injured, but I'm not your mother." She took a breath. "I'm not a victim. I'm his equal."

He fastened his pants, began buttoning his shirt. "I can't take that chance."

"But it's me," said Natasha. "I'm the one taking the chance. And I'm telling you I like my chances."

He turned back around to face her, stood, silent for a moment, breathing in and out as he took her in with his eyes.

"Natasha," he said. "This is exactly what I was trying to prevent."

"Clint pushed me out a third-story window once," Natasha replied. "By accident. It happens in our line of work."

She smiled. "But don't tell him I told you? He's a little...sensitive about that."

Bruce just watched her, shook his head, smoothed down his shirtsleeves, slid his sneakers on, one at a time, without unlacing them. "Natasha, I can't--"

"It was my fault," she said. "I didn't have anyone covering you; I should have."
“How can it be your fault?”

She pressed her lips together. “I anticipated it,” she said. “I took a calculated risk; I knew they couldn’t really hurt you. I knew that the minute they tried, it would prove fatal to all of them. I used you as a weapon.”

He looked away. “We should go,” he said.
In spite of the silence on their return trip, Natasha tried to treat the night as if it were no different from any other. She went to her rooms, took a shower, changed into her pajamas, picked up the bottle of wine she’d been saving for the next time she needed one, and went downstairs, hair still dripping.

Bruce wasn’t in the lab.

Natasha was about to turn to go when something caught the light, silver and glinting on her desk. She stepped over, picked it up.

It was a bookmark, slender and delicate and gleaming, a silver sun on a hammered stem.

There was a little tarnish to it, the silver plating rubbed off in places, as if it was very well-used, and the stem was warped, as if it had been bent and then straightened.

The stem had an engraving on it, a single sentence in French.

*Au milieu de l’hiver, j’ai découvert en moi un invincible été.*

Natasha gritted her teeth. "Fucking Camus."

There was a yellow square sticky note beneath it.

"This went from my mother to me. Thought I’d pass it along."

--B

"Fucking Bruce," she added.

She clutched the bookmark in her fist, so tight it left a whitening divot in her palm, and went up to his rooms.

She rang the buzzer.

No answer.

She knocked.

"Bruce?" She asked. "Bruce, let me in."

She waited to a count of ten.

"JARVIS. Let me in."

"I'm sorry, Agent," said JARVIS. "Doctor Banner has given me strict protocols expressly forbidding-"

"This is SHIELD Specialist Romanova, codename Black Widow, instructing a Level Ten system override."

"Passcode?"

"I hate you, Tony Stark." She sighed and rolled her eyes, pressed her fingertip against the closest

The door slid open.

The lights were out. The front living area seemed silent and serene. A knapsack sat open on the coffee table, the only thing out of place. Everything else was so tidy it seemed nearly inhuman.

"Bruce?"

No answer.

She put the wine down on the coffee table and stepped into the bedroom, clutching the bookmark like a knife.

"Bruce."

He was very carefully laying out clothes, and a few spare belongings, on the bed. His photo of Aunt Susan. A first aid kit. Some vials of...something, she didn't know what. *The Poetics of Space. Historia Calamitatum* and the *Epistolae* of Abelard and Heloise. She winced, internally, pressed her hand to the doorframe so she wouldn't wince externally, too.

He looked up. *He* winced externally.

"Where are you going?" She asked.

"Telling you sort of defeats the purpose," he answered. "You got me, Widow. I can't do that again."

"It's going to happen again whether or not you stay here," she replied.

"It won't," Bruce replied. "Not to-- not like that." His mouth was a tight, grim line, his brow knitted. He didn't take his eyes off her. "Not if I'm far away."

She stepped into the other room, gathered up his backpack and brought it in to him. "Do you have money?" She asked. "Remember what I said. Four hours. They'll freeze your accounts after that."

"I sent another resignation letter," he answered.

"You're an idiot," she said. She looked over the few belongings she'd laid out. "Money. Papers. Do you need me to get you papers?"

"Papers, I've got," Bruce replied. "Money, enough. Natasha, you know this isn't the first time I've done this."

"Not under these circumstances," she replied. She fumbled in her pocket, pulled out Stark's phone, swiped a few times, handed it over. "Trade phones," she said.

Bruce frowned, but he took out his own phone (plain, black case, outdated OS) and looked at the screen for a moment.

"There's a chip in it," she said. "Stark and I both took the chips out of our phones, we're running them over Stark's own network. SHIELD won't be able to run a trace on you without a subpoena."

Bruce hesitated, and then took the phone.
"Remember," she said, straightening her shoulders, stern and all hard edges. "You have three, maybe four hours. Call Stark, he'll buy you time. Literally."

"Natasha," Bruce said softly, his own shoulders sloping, his body leaning toward her, his neck craned in her direction. "I don't need to hide. I just need to be away from here. If SHIELD wants to watch-- well, I was going to say, who am I to judge, but I do judge, when it comes to that. But it won't-- won't interfere with my work, or..."

She nodded, fitted the rest of his things into his bag. "If you think that's best, then," she replied.

She held out the bag, buckled the closures.

"Natasha," he said, and his eyes lingered on hers.

"Go," she said. "If you need to go, go, or I can't promise..."

He took the bag, slung it over his shoulder, and looked at her again. "I'll call tonight."

"Call Stark," she said. "He'll be able to help."

"I'll call you."

It was easy to imagine, from the way he didn't take his eyes from her, the way he hesitated, the way it seemed as if his center of balance had shifted to gravitate forward, toward her, the way he shuffled, feet listless, an apprehensive tension in his mouth, that if she stepped closer, folded herself against him, he wouldn't leave.

Instead, she stepped aside.

He walked out the door.
The first thing she did, when he left, was to go down to the lab with his phone, replace the chip SHIELD had implanted with one of Stark's, power the phone back up, crack his password (last four digits of his childhood phone number, check)--

And see the photo saved on the background.

Her photo.

That photo, the photo from the day in Asbury Park, standing in the midst of the debris on the jetty, water spraying up over her boots, hair whipping around her shoulders in the wind.

She looked like some kind of figure from an ancient epic, sight set on some point in the distance, the goal of her quest.

She gave him three hours. And then she tracked the signal Stark's phone was emitting.

He hadn't done too badly. If he'd been hunted down by anyone else, he might have lasted long enough to make his next move.

As it was, she could have guessed his location even without planting the tracker.

She got on the A train to Penn Station.

Her phone played "Secret Agent Man."

"This is Widow," she answered.

"Have you heard from Banner?" Fury asked.

"Since his last attempt to resign? No. I'm going to retrieve him, Sir."

"Do you need backup? We can't get a trace on you."

"Director, I think you just answered your own question, didn't you? It's better if I go in alone. He trusts me."

"Are you sure?"

She took a breath. “It needs to be me. Alone. No tricks this time, Director.”

She walked to the seashore from the train station, hugging her coat tightly to herself– she joked that after winters in Russia, she'd never be cold again, but somehow the cold struck her more violently now, eating into her bones, making her feel as if her blood was tinged with frost.

The beach looked different now-- cleaned up, mostly, since the hurricane, but more bare than it had been the autumn before. Taped-off barricades, plastic and wire fencing, surrounded damaged buildings.

Construction vehicles dotted the sand and the boardwalk here and there.
The Casino was strewn with bits of trash, glass windowpanes were still missing.

She saw him easily, as she searched out the hollows in the walls, a glint of light betraying him in the blackness of his hideaway.

She walked out into the open, put her hands in the air.

"Kind of chilly in here, Doc," she called up.

She heard something fall to the floor with a clunk.

He came to the edge of the balcony, crawling, slung his legs over the side.

"Not really a consideration, Widow," he answered. "Did Fury send you?"

"I came on my own steam," she replied. "He called me, if that's what you mean. You didn't think I'd show?"

"I thought you'd show sooner, to be honest," he said, and he cracked a nervous smile.

"Do you want to come down here, or should I come up there?"

He leaned forward, gauged the distance down. "Give me a, ah...."

"How did you even get up--" Natasha began to ask, but she quieted at the look on his face. "Ah."

"No one was around. It was easier," he explained.

"It isn't far," she pointed out. "You've done higher with me. Just roll on impact, like I showed you."

She stepped back, out of the way.

He gave her a dubious look, took a deep breath, and leapt.

His execution was terrible, and though he landed with a grunt, she didn't hear any crunching or snapping or the signs that usually signified broken bones-- and she suspected the Hulk would have dealt with those, if they'd happened, anyway.

She stalked over, offered him a hand up.

He made it to his feet, took a deep breath and stock of the situation, dusted himself off with one hand.

He didn't release his other hand from hers.

She saw no need to drop his.

He pointed a thumb toward the space he'd just vacated. "I, ah, sort of left my stuff up there," he said.

"Does that mean you're coming home?" she asked.

"Funny how you say 'home' so easy."

"I've never had the kind of home you're talking about," she reminded him. "It's where I live. Home."
He opened his mouth.

"Don't compare it to a prison," she said. "You don't know what that's like."

"I know what it's like to be--"

"You know what jail is like. Not prison."

He tangled his fingers into hers, threading them together in a tight weave.

"Sometimes you have no sympathy," he said quietly, not quite meeting her gaze.

"Only when you're being insufferable," she answered, staring directly at his eyes even if he wouldn't let her look into them. "Come home."

"Are you authorized to use force? Threats?"

"I wouldn't," she replied.

"Maybe you wouldn't," he said. "Is this going to be like the last time you dragged me to New York? Am I going to walk out into a night full of SWAT teams?"

She tugged at his hand. "See for yourself."

The air on the beach was icy, frigid. It seemed almost madness to crawl through the boardwalk barriers, to drop onto the sand below, to walk out onto that jetty of dark, slippery rock. Still, their feet found their way there.

It wasn't entirely outside of Natasha's expectation. She'd worn high boots, waterproofed trousers. Bruce, on the other hand, was not at all dressed for it; his sneakers were already soaked through. His teeth chattered.

"You going to be okay out here, Doc?"

"Little cold," he replied. "I can deal."

"But you don't have to," she answered. "You could stop punishing yourself."

He shook his head. "That's not what I'm doing," he said. "This just seems like the right place to be."

"If you decide to go," she said slowly. "SHIELD won't hunt you down. They'll watch you, of course, but they won't-- not unless they have to."

"Who decides whether they have to?"

She raised an eyebrow. "In your case? Me."

She took both of his hands into hers, rubbed his fingers with her gloved ones.

"And that's the trouble," he said, uncertainly. "When are you speaking for SHIELD? When are you speaking for yourself?"

"All the time," Natasha answered, bitterly. "Do you think so little of me that you'd believe I'd speak for them if I didn't agree?"

She took her hands from his, he caught them back again, in mid-swing, and slid his icy fingers
into the sleeves of her coat.

She shivered, but stepped closer.

"I think you might think it's occasionally worth whatever greater good it gains."

"Come home," she said. "Or at least come in from the cold."

"The Casino's hardly warmer."

"There's a hotel just up the boardwalk," she replied, nodding northward. "We have a room. Come home."

"I'm not...Natasha," he said, his eyes following her gesture, his gaze remaining there, fixated on something in the distance. "It's not safe. It's not safe for me to be there. I'm not safe. You have to understand, I--"

"I do understand. Come home."

She pulled his hands toward her, brought them under the bell of her winter coat, dropped them against her hips.

"You don't understand, I--"

But his fingers tensed, pressed in, found the curves of her hipbones and fitted themselves against them.

She pressed herself closer.

"You don't own all the pain in the world, you know."

"But I'm responsible for the pain I cause," Bruce replied.

"So am I," said Natasha.

She pressed herself against him, let his arms encircle her, laid her cheek against his chest. "You want to guess who has the longer kill sheet?" she asked. "At least you've always meant well."

"I'm a doctor," he replied. "Do no harm."

She was shivering; her teeth were chattering. "Come home."

He drew his arms closer around her. "No one really wants me there," he said.

"Stark does. Once all the dust settles, once he's moved into the Tower, he's going to need friends."

"Tony has plenty of friends. He's hardly lacking for friends." He raised an eyebrow at her. "You didn't come here to talk about Tony."

"But you already know I do," she answered. "I want you there."

"Are you just trying to get me back to the Tower?" he asked.

"That's exactly what I'm doing," she answered. "Not for SHIELD. Although they certainly benefit. For me. I want you there. Come home."

He was quiet for a moment, a long moment, a moment long enough to make her heart beat fast,
her chin quiver.

"Does home describe a circle that includes you and me?" he asked, softly, his voice faltering, almost disappearing in the wind and the pulsing crash of the waves.

She butted her forehead against his chin. "Are you trying to freeze me into submission? Why do you think I'm here? Come home."

"Because it's your job." He trembled, pressed a kiss to her forehead. "I need to know if SHIELD wants me there, or you want me there."

"Both," she said. "They're not mutually exclusive. Come home."

“You told me you’d never ask me to stay.”

“Askng you to stay isn’t the same as asking you to return. Come home.”

"And what happens-- If I come back now, will you let me leave? If I decide I need to?"

"I'll help you," she answered. "Come home."

"You won't track my location?" He asked.

"You wanted to be found," she said. "Come home."

"Is that a persuasive tactic? Just repeating the same plea at the end of every sentence?"

She leaned forward, elevated on her toes, slid a hand up below his jacket, twisted her fingers into the fabric of his sweater. She pressed her mouth to his, and in the winter salt air, their lips were chapped, rough, cold on cold intensified, and she inhaled the flavor of blood.

"Come home," she whispered into his mouth.

He grinned. He grinned, and his teeth chattered together like percussion. "You should have done that sooner," he chided. "That, that was persuasive."

He leaned toward her. She put her fingers to his mouth, backed away. "Then we can continue that line of reasoning at the hotel," she answered. "I'm freezing my ass off."

He inclined his head, released her, reached for her hands again.

"As you wish."

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much, team!!!!

The end of this story brings us up to March, 2013. 1796 Broadway picks up in September, 2013 and is ongoing with daily updates.
Works inspired by this one: "The Bus’s Unexpected Stoppers" by CatChan

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