

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

FACULTY OF ARTS, HUMANITIES, AND SOCIAL SCIENCES

MAKING THE INVISIBLE VISIBLE: AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENT, GUIDED
INTERVENTIONS AND CRAFT IN FAN FICTION-MODELED STORYTELLING

ALLANAH K. HUNT

A thesis in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of Anglia Ruskin University for the degree of
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(Creative Writing)

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Abstract

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This thesis investigates how writers can use craft strategies common within fan fiction to promote affective learning and explore how interventions can be used to interject poignantly into existing canon. This was done through textual analysis, secondary sources and creative research by writing a 75,000 word hybrid novel (titled *Avengers: The Privileged Few*) set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and 30,000 word exegesis. The aims of this project have been to explore different ways to promote affective learning, to propose an affective learning paradigm and create interventions—Aboriginal ways of knowing, a critique of unremarked Whiteness and the exploration of coloured feminism, centring on ownership of women's bodies. I have made an Aboriginal feminist viewpoint visible in the MCU, adding to Aboriginal literature in Australia.

Throughout my PhD, I found that embracing the affective aspect and value system of fan fiction helped me create a proposed paradigm for affective learning, inspired by Anna Wilson's work on affective and fannish hermeneutics. Through the writing of *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, it also showed me the craft strategies of free indirect discourse, domesticity and positive group dynamics could be used effectively outside of a fan fiction context, potentially bringing a comfort to readers when reading about emotionally challenging topics. These discoveries helped me make my three key interventions.

I came to the conclusions that fan fiction and many of its associated craft techniques are an effective way of exploring hard issues. Fan fiction often promotes the comfort and affect suggested in affective learning as well as reaching wider audiences in a traditionally-action based novel that makes an Indigenous feminist viewpoint available where there wasn't one before.

Key words: Fan fiction, MCU, coloured feminism, interventions, creative craft techniques, affective paradigm, Indigeneity, Whiteness, Aboriginal ways of knowing

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The Avengers: The Privileged Few

By

Allanah Hunt

I love a sunburnt country.
That is mine but not for me.

I love a sunburnt country.

“A love like Dorothea’s”
by Alison Whittaker

Prologue

After so long, Robert James was used to the red dirt. How it coated his teeth, covered his boots and clogged his pores.

But he couldn't get used to the dust storms. When dirt gritted into his eyes until all he could see was blood. He could taste it whenever he swallowed. Sometimes, it was all he could do to stop from choking.

Beside him, Deborah Stanton spat a mouthful of dirt onto the ground. She'd only have to do it again in another minute or so.

Robert rubbed his arm across his sweaty forehead, succeeding only in streaking mud across his face.

'We're going to have to go back,' Deborah said, 'aren't we?'

He gritted his teeth. 'Not again.'

'Frustrated as you are, James.'

'The kids are getting further and further away each day.'

'You think I don't know that?'

Robert knew her anger was desperation. They were all desperate. And worried. He could imagine all the scouts cursing as the dust storm rolled in and they were forced to go back. He couldn't hear the helicopters whirring anymore and imagined they had turned tail too. There was no point continuing to search with zero visibility.

'Just a bit longer.'

Deborah humoured him. Or maybe she was humouring herself too that a few more feet would bring them closer to the clue the army had been searching for all along.

The clue that would reveal the missing children and the people who stole them.

The crazy thing was—those few extra feet did.

Initially, the boab tree looked no different from the others dotted over the landscape. It was an eerie-looking tree, its inflated middle too much like a strung-up corpse with a bloated stomach for Robert's comfort.

Watching it out of his peripheral, he saw a piece of cloth tied to one of its branches, snapping and twisting about in the growing storm. Squinting to try to make out the pattern, he felt his heart rise with hope for the first time in a long time.

It was the colourful dot-patterned material one of the suspects had been wearing the day she stole the children away.

‘Deb!’ he called, pointing triumphantly.

But Deborah didn’t share his excitement. In fact, she didn’t even look. Instead, she stood, hands up, gun dropped to the ground, eyes frozen at a point past his shoulder.

Instinct kicked in. He spun around, gun in hand.

He saw three hooded figures shimmering like mirages in the swirling dust. Then his body was kicked back with the force of the bullet entering his stomach.

One gasp... another... and he fell.

Wind whooshed in his ears. He wished he could see the blue sky, but all he could see was red...

His blood didn’t show on the ground. If it wasn’t for the burning pain, he could’ve pretended he hadn’t been shot. He could get up, walk until he could see the sky and take his wife into his arms.

He felt arms around him; unfamiliar, not like Eleanor’s... still, the sentiment was nice...

He longed to see a friendly face. But all he could see was red.

He heard a voice before he died. Not his wife’s laughter or his baby’s cries. No. Only this voice, saying:

‘You’re never finding them.’

Chapter 1

Natasha sat on the rock outcropping, watching the Jungfrau edge its way out of the morning mist. The texture of the mountain wasn't particularly clear today. The half-risen sun gave off streaks of red and yellow that hadn't broken through the fog. Yet.

Yellow didn't worry her much. Through her eyes, yellow formed an aura around a person whose authenticity she doubted. Safe or not safe? That was the question she asked when she saw yellow. That meant: Watch cautiously but don't pounce. Pick your time carefully.

Black was worse. That meant danger that you couldn't see. Harder to counter. Uncertainty was almost a death wish in her line of work, but so far she'd always managed to stay ahead of the curve.

As for red...

Natasha shivered. It would be a cold day in little Gimmelwald. She sat in a loose shirt, enjoying the iciness on her bare arms. It was invigorating and made her senses feel sharp. Below, the few cottages and shacks were still in darkness. She was up even before the farmers.

Gimmelwald was quiet, accessible only by foot. Natasha never realized how she was used to the hum of some sort of vehicle in the distance. But here?

Nothing.

She glanced at her watch.

'And Elias... enter.'

Sure enough, the old farmer came staggering out of his hut in the distance and began yelling at the sheep in a drunken stupor.

She'd never known she had a tendency to talk to herself. Not until she had faced months on the run in such isolated places.

It was a bittersweet discovery. This was as close to knowing *Natasha Romanoff* as she would ever get.

All this quiet time was allowing her mind and memories to become too loud. At night was the worst.

Her skin tingled at the thought of how long she'd been here. She had laid low for a lot longer before, but always for a reason. For a *mission*.

Her whole life had been a constant balance of walking along a beam high up in the mist. One wrong move and she'd go down. Now, she felt pointless in her journey, no reason to keep going deeper into the fog, yet no reason to turn back.

But, she was no quitter. She was keeping her balance, waiting for that moment. To be something that someone needed her to be.

Finally, the sun's rays began to break through the mist around Jungfrau with too many hues of red.

Natasha skittered away from the rays like a vampire.

She couldn't decide if that was funny or sad. Mostly because she couldn't settle into the right persona right now. Quirky and ditzy to deflect and distract? Silent and intimidating to draw and de-claw?

'You've got far too much time for thinking,' she muttered.

The trip down the grassy slope, crackling slightly with the morning ice, was quicker than the trip up. The hotel inn was easy to spot as it was the only place with a thatched roof. She didn't like that because it was easier to set on fire than the other houses. She knew this from experience. She also had contingency plans.

Slipping in soundlessly, she saw the owner of the inn, Elena, opening up the reception. Her little girl, Mia, was up too. The child was running around the communal lounge area, a crowded space of stereotypical bear rugs and game heads hanging from the walls. All false, but Natasha still felt uneasy with all these trophies on the walls.

Some of her previous bosses had done that. Only not with stuffed animals. Death as décor, no matter which species. No wonder she had no appetite when here.

She slipped up the staircase, hiding from Elena and Mia's sight.

The less of an imprint she left behind her, the safer it was for everyone. After her leaking all the information from S.H.I.E.L.D., this was the way she had been operating, moving from location to location in case some old acquaintances wanted to pay her a visit. Gimmelwald was the place she'd stayed longest, but it wasn't the place where she felt the safest. She knew where that was but wasn't sure if she could return now.

Upstairs, she unlocked the first room of the hallway to her right. It had the perfect view over the village and was close enough to other buildings to jump to the

next roof. Also, she had access to the roof through a strategic hole she'd created in the ceiling. You'd need to be a spy or doing renovations to find that.

She heard the beeping from her room before she got her door open. Morse code: *Budapest sucked, Budapest sucked*, over and over again.

A smile curved onto Natasha's face, genuine and unforced. She moved smoothly into the room and coded back her burner phone number.

Within a few seconds, the phone rang.

'You're early. Either that means the world is on fire or Lila's jumped on your bed earlier than usual.'

'*If it's the former, you're remarkably calm.*' Clint, dry as always, but Natasha heard the happiness there.

'What else is new if the world was on fire?'

'*I think you've officially crossed the point to de-sensitised.*'

'Shock horror.' Natasha flopped down on the bed. 'Tell me something I don't know. Also, not rhetorical. Please tell me something I don't know.'

His chuckling made the line crackle. '*I take it quiet living doesn't make your heart sing?*'

Sometimes, it was like Clint knew more about her—not a persona she was playing but actually *her*—than she did herself. One of the things which made him the closest person to her out of everyone she'd ever known.

'You could say that. I watched a sunrise this morning, Clint. A sunrise.'

'*Damn. You have hit a new low. But fear not. I have news that might cheer your mug up.*'

'You have such a way with words.'

'*You want to hear the news or not?*'

'So sensitive. But, yes, shoot.'

She thought he might have some fun stories about the kids. That was usually what perked her up. What she didn't expect him to say was, '*What do you think about getting the old band back together?*'

She blinked. 'Come again. And be specific this time. I need details. Old band as in a faction of S.H.I.E.L.D. or as in...'

Clint got the cue, as always, that he was meant to fill in the next part. '*Well, it's not official, but Stark and Rogers are calling us all in to discuss some deal that's happening with the government.*'

‘I must have misheard you. Because I’m pretty sure you just said Stark *and* Rogers. In the same sentence, like they’re working together or something. Last I remembered, they don’t play too nice with each other.’

‘When we first met, we didn’t officially play nice either. I was kind of meant to kill you.’

Natasha tilted her head to the side and pulled her lips down in a fair-enough expression. ‘Point.’ She swallowed, her only visible sign of nervousness. ‘Everyone’s going to be there?’

‘I’m not sure about Thor. Hard to pin down what dimension he’s in so don’t know what area code to dial.’

Natasha managed a soft, ‘Okay.’ The thing was, she wasn’t really interested if Thor was going to be there. It was someone else.

‘I mean, you know Banner’s going to be there, right?’

‘Why should I know that?’

‘He’s still living with Stark. Hasn’t changed. What sort of spy are you?’

‘One that only gathers necessary intel and not useless gossip.’ She didn’t skip a beat in their banter. Despite feeling like ice had curled into her chest, making it hard to keep her breath in control.

She’d tried to forget about Bruce. It was one problem she couldn’t control so she pretended it wasn’t there. That was only possible to do because she believed Bruce would eventually disappear into the ether, just as she had.

Deep down though, there was a part of her that hoped he wouldn’t go. She didn’t want him to feel as lonely as she did now.

Apparently, he wasn’t planning to.

‘You get grumpy with lack of sleep.’

She ignored that. ‘How has that worked?’

‘What?’

‘Stark and Banner, under one roof. How have they not killed each other... or the world... by now?’

‘Gee, I don’t know. I don’t gather useless gossip.’

‘You get petty with lack of sleep.’

Clint ignored her in lieu of the next question. ‘*So, what do you say, Nat? Ready to come in out of the cold? Stark’s finally gotten the government to back off on you. You’ve also got the standing offer at the Tower. No safer place for you.*’

The thought of living under the same roof as Bruce...

How would it work? How would it be safe? How could she *control* it all?

She felt fierceness rise up within her.

If there was one thing she knew about Natasha Romanoff and not the numerous aliases she'd taken over the years, it was that she was no coward. She'd never walk away because she didn't want to face something that scared her.

She swallowed again. 'You sure he's got the government to back off?'

She wasn't stupid enough to waltz back and think they wouldn't put her in hold for a bit.

'I wouldn't ask you to come back if I didn't think it was completely safe.' All the banter dropped from Clint's tone. Only soft hope remained.

Her breathing eased. Clint missed her too.

'Okay.'

'Seriously? You'll come back home?' Clint's voice rose out of its usual dry monotones with excitement.

Natasha felt cold at Clint's easy mention of home but didn't correct him on it.

'Yep. Coming back,' she deflected.

Clint calling out to the kids and their resulting cheers dampened down the feeling of dread of what she was going back into.

Interlude 1

Until now, Deborah Stanton had been scared three times in her life.

Once, when her father held a steak knife to her mother's throat.

Second time, her best friend went missing in combat for three days.

And the third was when her goddaughter had temporarily stopped breathing during birth.

Now, she could make it four.

The figures, clad in cloaks, hoods and dust, wrapped James' body in a tarp.

Unlike before, when she was scared for someone else's life, this time, she was scared for her own.

She was forced onto her knees and stripped of her gun. She waited for the bullet to the back of her head...

But, instead, one of them crouched down in front of her, shoving an ugly face close. The bared teeth were glaringly white against all the red and black.

'You want to join him?'

It was a choice. *Listen or be shot.*

These people had taken *children*. She wasn't going to get mercy here.

Still though, a little part of her believed she was going to make it out the other side if she kept her head down.

'No.'

The smile became crueller. 'No?'

'No, ma'am.'

There was a shout behind the women. The person left Deborah and began to argue in a different language with another of the dark-clad silhouettes.

Deborah didn't know that they could speak something else. All she thought they knew was English. The revelation unnerved her.

How could she escape if she didn't understand what was going on around her?

A gun cocked at the back of her head and someone ordered her to stand.

Taking a deep breath, she refused to cry as she listened.

They ordered her to move forward, further into the growing storm around them. On and on she went, trying not to think of her best friend. Her mum. Her goddaughter.

Most of all, she tried not to think of James' lifeless body swinging in the tarp two of the people carried between them. Back and forth, back and forth, it went in the wind, mocking and terrifying all in one.

Chapter 2

Natasha spent her plane ride reading up on the government pitch. It was nice to have something to work towards. She wasn't complaining about the private compartment she had in the commercial airline either. A welcome break from the leering looks of random men.

'Ambassadorial Avengers,' she muttered, flicking back through the folder. 'What a name.'

It looked more like politically-based missions than action-packed infiltrations or downright battles. After all, it was being proposed by a government who wanted to be endorsed by the Avengers in the hopes of receiving public support. People didn't trust the government the way they had before she and Steve took down the Triskellion.

Something inside her twisted at the idea of being a political puppet. But maybe this could work. Who knew? Obviously the plan must have had some merits for Steve and Tony to give it a second glance.

She was relieved to get off the plane and out of the airport, breathing in the New York air. Muggy, like she remembered, and most importantly, familiar.

She immediately recognized the figure in the private pick-up area.

'Well,' Natasha flicked up her sunglasses. 'This wasn't the greeting I was expecting.'

Tony, leaning against the open door of the limousine, flashed her a peace sign. 'What can I say, Red? I wanted to give it a personal touch.'

The pick-up area was weirdly quiet after the hustle and bustle of the airport. She'd seen the border security watching her intensely, but other than that, they didn't bother her.

She was guessing she had Tony to thank for that. She was officially able to come back into the country legally and not under a false passport. Not that she so much had a real one but she supposed Natasha Romanoff was the closest she got to legitimate.

Glancing around, she noted Happy Hogan sitting in the front of the car but no one else.

'Where's Clint?'

‘Believe it or not, Katniss was actually busy. Who knew he had a life?’

Oh, Tony didn’t know the half of it.

She consciously loosened her stance. ‘Where’s everyone else?’

Tony raised an eyebrow as he indicated for her to slide in. ‘If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were disappointed to see me.’

As often happened, Natasha’s need to recon made her forget the socialising part of human nature.

She actually felt a flare of guilt. Tony had obviously put off a lot of things to pick her up.

She also noted how he was dressed.

Mock leather jacket almost hid the Led Zepplin shirt underneath with soft dress pants, complete with neon pink Nikes. So, for Tony, casual wear.

Not in Stark mode, but Tony.

He was trying to reach out to her, but in Tony’s own way.

That touched Natasha more than she thought it would.

It felt natural to pat his shoulder as she slipped into the back of the limousine.

‘Don’t be ridiculous. I’ve missed hanging out with hyper-verbal millionaires.’

‘That’s offensive.’ Tony glanced once, twice, around before hopping in as well. ‘It’s billionaire.’

In turn, his smile became less cutting. He even looked Natasha in the eye, something she found he didn’t do with people he couldn’t be bothered with.

‘Nice to see you come in from the cold, Anastasia.’

Natasha enjoyed the natural chuckle that came from the words. ‘There’s so many things wrong with that sentence, do you know that?’

Tony coyly slipped his sunglasses back on. ‘I know everything.’

It was only then she realized how pleased she was that Tony picked her up after all.

Interlude 2

Section 4.7 of Cpt. Lloyd Kramer's Incident Report

The north-midlands quadrant of Alia Surat, territory of Northern Hopes, is currently being searched for the missing children from the community of Sierra, suspected kidnapping by the terrorist group, Nhuungku.

On the 21st of August, 2014, army personnel were sent out in hopes of retracing clues. All the profiles are attached to this report. Amongst them were SCT Robert James and Private Deborah Stanton. When the troops were recalled on account of a dust storm, both soldiers never returned. Subsequent search parties have been sent out to no avail.

It is assumed they are dead. I submit this report to you, Gen. Sussler, in hopes of extending time and efforts to search more thoroughly for the two missing soldiers before reporting them as M.I.A. assumed dead.

We suspect that Nhuungku is behind the disappearance. If so, they are getting stronger. We request further back-up to help fight this growing problem and protect the children within our care. The requested equipment and supplies are itemised and attached to said report.

Because of the apparent increase in the hostile's strength, Missiles J-142 and S-761 are also included in the list.

‘So I can print about this?’ Danielle put her legs up on her oak desk. ‘I can even mention the soldiers’ names?’

‘It’s been over two months since I received that report,’ Stuart replied, leaning back in his starched uniform, hands folded over his general’s cap. ‘Families have long been notified and the search parties called off.’

‘Always knew there was a benefit to having a soldier as my ex.’

‘Always knew there was a benefit to having an editor-in-chief as mine.’ All coyness vanished. ‘We need this gaining public momentum. It’s the only way we’ll get the support we need over there and stop these sorts of tragedies from continuing to happen. We just can’t gain traction compared to the action over in the Middle East.’

Danielle raised her eyebrows. ‘Continuing?’

‘What?’

‘You said these sorts of tragedies *continuing* to happen.’

‘That’s not for print.’

‘Not yet?’

‘Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,’ he said, putting on his hat. ‘Have a good day at work, Danielle.’

‘Well, I will now.’ She grimaced. ‘Sorry, that was insensitive.’

Stuart nodded, and took his leave.

Chapter 3

The Tower looked decidedly less broken then the last time Natasha had laid eyes on it. Fewer alien carcasses lying around too.

Despite the Tower's lavish appearance outside, it was quite quaint on the inside, the colours not as ostentatious as what she would expect from someone like Tony. She'd forgotten that. They'd been in the middle of an alien invasion after all.

The elevator doors opened automatically. Natasha couldn't help a spike of fear, waiting to see someone on the other side. But of course it was empty, only happening courtesy of JARVIS. Still though, it reminded her how she hated only having her bare minimum defences on her: three knives and a choking wire.

'Welcome home, Sir. Nice to see you again, Agent Romanoff.'

'Just Ms. is fine, Jarvis.'

'Name change noted, Ms. Romanoff.'

'When are you so obliging, JARVIS?' Tony mused.

'Since I am spoken to with equal parts respect and appreciation, Sir.'

'Ignore him,' Tony waved his hand dismissively, 'he's just cranky because Daddy muted him last night.'

She raised an amused eyebrow at his wording.

He stared back in mock offense. 'What? Never seen a single father before? I mean, Pepper's the step-mom but I don't like the term. Has some horrible stereotypes, don't you think? I was thinking of creating my own, original familial title. What do you like most? Mammalicious or Better-Than-Mum Replacement?'

A smile cracked her veneer despite herself. She had forgotten Tony's talent of carrying on a conversation solely by himself.

'It sounds like you're naming protein shakes,' she said dryly.

Tony's eyes lit up.

'Don't open a protein shake line.'

'Dum-E's already a pro at making them. Nothing like a mix of spinach and grease oil to dampen your appetite.'

'Sounds scrumptious,' she deadpanned.

This time, a smile broke through Tony's walls. He leaned back onto the railing. 'Always was fun talking to you, Red.'

The doors opened to Tony's penthouse.

'Drink?' Tony nodded to his bar. 'Vodka?'

Natasha hardly took note of the thinly veiled insult, which was generally the way Tony talked to anyone.

If it was Clint offering, she would have gone for the vodka.

'Just make that an apple juice.'

'You used to be more fun.' He handed her a glass and leaned against the floor-to-ceiling windows with his own glass of juice.

She wondered if he was on the same page, not comfortable enough to have his senses dimmed around her.

She seated herself on a couch in the corner so she had full view of the penthouse. Off to the left was a breakfast bar leading to a small kitchen. She couldn't imagine Tony or Pepper to be people who spent large amounts of time in the kitchen.

'You don't mind hanging out here for a bit?' Tony asked, face sans sunglasses. 'Your level's still being readied. Probably be another ten minutes.'

'My level?'

'Well, I thought it was ready,' Tony continued on, oblivious to her surprise. 'Pepper disagreed. The contractors are putting the finishing touches on it now.'

Natasha watched him sharply.

She knew a lie when she heard one. And, without a doubt, Tony's words contained the delicate thread of an untruth. However, unlike when she lithely wove together her threads to create a web to hurt or ruin, she believed Tony's lie didn't have that intention.

That didn't make her feel any easier.

'Where is everybody?'

'Well.' Tony's fingers danced along the rim of his cup. If he noticed her increased attentiveness, he didn't show it. 'Richard Kimble is following up on a lead with his wingman on the one-armed man.'

As the information sunk in, Natasha softened.

'He's still looking for Bucky?'

Of course Steve still was.

Despite being one of those people who hadn't passed all of her set tests to see if he could be trusted, Steve had become a calming blue to her. Steve wasn't naïve but he had a way of handling himself which made people trust him.

Steve vocalized when he didn't trust her; he vocalized when he did. He couldn't hide his thoughts or emotions. Natasha liked that. It made her comfortable.

Tony cleared his throat in exaggeration. 'Make that we.'

'You're helping,' she said softly.

This fact was no surprise to her. Tony Stark cared about his teammates. Even though he would admit it when hell froze over.

As she expected, Tony deflected. Something she realized they both did.

'I've got to put my billions somewhere.'

'Does Steve know?'

'Know what?'

She raised an eyebrow at him.

He started tapping out a pattern on his glass. He looked nervy, if Tony Stark could look nervy. 'You free tonight? Pepper's putting together a group dinner. Everyone's going to be here.'

Before she could recover from his whiplash subject change, all her senses were taken up by hearing the door click open behind the bar.

Her hand slipped down to the knife resting against her hip, comfort in the coolness of the blade. She still managed to smile, one part pleasantry, other part carefully-placed warmth, as she stood.

'Long time no see, Doc.'

A hunched figure emerged from behind the bar.

Bruce Banner's curls were longer than the last time she had seen him. A full beard now covered the lower half of his face and his clothes were plain, just how he liked them, a cream-coloured button-down shirt with grey slacks. This time though, they fitted him perfectly.

He nodded back genially, but she could tell he wasn't falling for her act in the slightest. Unlike in Kolkata when she thought he was playing right into the palm of her hands.

'And you, Agent Romanoff.'

That was another thing about Bruce she had almost forgotten. He often said sentences in a way so it was hard to determine whether he was being genuine or sardonic.

Tony appeared oblivious to their tension.

‘Shrek!’ he called and a glitter appeared in his eyes. His fingers stopped tapping against the glass. ‘Took you long enough to emerge from the swamp.’

Natasha worked hard on not tightening up at the mention of Bruce’s other... counterpart.

‘Caught up in a last few details.’ Bruce’s eyes flickered to her. Shadowy streaks wavered off his aura, like hands trying to physically warn her away. ‘Didn’t know you had company.’

‘The more the merrier, Doc,’ she said.

From the way Bruce watched her before glancing away, she wasn’t sure she had landed that lie.

‘Not really, but it’s you, so that’s fine,’ Tony grinned. He clapped Bruce on the shoulder. For the briefest of moments, Bruce’s continually hunched shoulders loosened.

This time, she saw what an actually genuine smile looked like on Bruce’s face. Shy but thoroughly pleased, it softened Bruce’s outward appearance.

‘Floor’s ready,’ he said.

Tony rolled his eyes. ‘It was before.’

‘Ready-*er* then.’

Something was being communicated Natasha didn’t know. And she wasn’t comfortable with that in the least.

‘My floor?’ she asked innocently.

‘Yep.’ Tony held out a hand towards the elevator. ‘Want to check it out?’

More than anything she wanted to check it out. Leave behind Bruce. Get used to his wavering dark light with small, *small* doses.

But this was one of those tricky social situations. If she left now, Bruce would realize he scared her. That was giving up power. He was the least person she could afford to give up power to.

She needed to coax him to trust her. And in turn, unwittingly give up power and control over to her.

‘I can wait.’ She sat down though everything in her screamed to stay standing. The only thing which brought her comfort was the cold steel of the knife pressed against her hip. ‘I haven’t caught up with Doc for a good while.’

Bruce edged back, fingers fiddling with the ends of his shirt, murmuring, ‘I wasn’t going to stay long anyway—’

‘Sure you were.’ Tony clapped him on the shoulder again. ‘Sit down and I’ll grab you a drink. Look at me, playing nice and everything?’

‘Pepper would be so proud,’ Bruce shot back, receiving a ‘I know, right?’ from Tony before he went to the bar.

Both Bruce and Natasha glanced at each other and he purposefully dropped his gaze. His fiddling increased and he didn’t sit down.

She indicated to the couch in front of her. ‘How’s city life treating you, Doc?’

He watched her closely, head ducked. As though he was afraid to look her in the eye, but she didn’t believe that was the case.

Bruce came across as meek and mild but she knew how aggressive he could be. She believed he did things subtly to throw her off her game. Like now, taking longer than what was socially deemed acceptable to answer.

However, he did slip down onto the couch, even if he stayed rigid. ‘Quieter than what I thought it would be,’ he said eventually.

‘That’s good.’

Nothing followed. She felt almost petty enough to say, ‘It’s your turn to start a conversation now,’ but withheld herself.

She always withheld herself from Bruce.

Never had she been more grateful for Tony’s oblivious presence then when he came waltzing back over, bottle of ginger beer in his hand.

‘Jeez, is ten minutes of silence in progress? What are we honouring here, death of conversation?’

She was uncomfortable at the glare Bruce sent Tony. A thin veil of ice slithered up her back as he became a darker shade to her.

Either Tony didn’t believe it was dangerous or he didn’t see it. What worried her was she was betting on the latter.

‘You have beautiful eyes.’ Tony took a theatrical sip from his drink.

A grin broke onto Bruce’s face.

‘You’re an idiot,’ he said, taking the ginger beer Tony obnoxiously shook in his face.

‘Genius.’

‘So I’ve been told. Over and over again.’

‘Yet, it never seems to stick.’

The whole dynamic threw Natasha more than she cared to admit. This was obviously something they were used to, comfortable in each other's actions and teasing. Meanwhile, she was searching for something to lean on to regain her balance but felt like everything was so brittle.

It was hard for her to accept a version of Bruce that was actually playful.

He always did this. Throwing her for a loop, not giving her a chance to get a read on him, figure out the best way to work him and win his trust.

Bruce was as relaxed as he probably got, rolling his eyes as he clinked his bottle with Tony's glass. Tony began going on about the proper edicts of toasts and how offensive it was to drink without doing at least a cheers. A whole speech in which Bruce nodded along, but she was pretty sure he was only listening to half of what was being said.

She didn't belong here. 'I think I might check out my level now.'

As she stood, Bruce's gaze shot to her.

His happiness flickered. This time, it wasn't micro aggression she glimpsed peeking through as she thought it seconds ago, or even barely contained toleration.

Fear. Bruce was fearful of her.

Interlude 3

The New York Cryer

Mock-up (Draft 3) for the 11.08.2014

Is There Any Hope Still Left for our M.I.A. Soldiers?

Scout Robert James and Private Deborah Stanton went missing in search of the stolen children in the third world country of Alia Surat. In a routine search of the territory of North Hopes, Robert James (22) and Deborah Stanton (25) never returned after a dust storm forced army personal to retreat back to the safety of the base. No bodies have been found but it is believed they are being held captive by the renegade Indigenous terrorist group, Nhuungku.

Alia Surat has claimed many soldiers in the movement known as The Intervention. A government movement, the Intervention aims to remove children from poor Indigenous villages where they have been subject to abuse from their own families and at the mercy of the Nhuungku terrorist group. Scout James and Private Stanton are one of many soldiers who have left their homes to make sure the children are given one like they had.

Story Continued On Page 3

‘This reads dry,’ Danielle said as she chucked the early version of the next morning’s headlines onto her desk. ‘Dry and heartless. You do realize you want the public siding with us, right?’

‘Needlessly dramatic.’ Herbert said, saggy face making him look like a depressed bulldog as he listlessly stirred a cup of tea.

‘That’s something I could have told you if you’d promote me to managing editor, Danielle,’ Lucy called from her desk.

‘I don’t pay you for advice.’ Danielle leaned around Herbert to shout out the doorway. ‘I pay you to vet calls from ex-husbands and you can’t even do that right.’

‘My point. Pay me to do something I actually can.’

‘Oh, for Christ sakes... Herb, shut the door before I do it when her leg is there.’

‘Needlessly cruel,’ Herbert paraphrased though he did shut the door with a smirk on his face.

Danielle puffed air out through her cheeks, leaning back in her plush office chair. ‘Illusion of peace. It’s good enough. Now, where was I?’

‘Disparaging the headline I’ve spent all afternoon working on?’

‘Correct. Do you want to try to guess your mistakes to become a better journalist and all that rot or do you want me to dive in headfirst?’

‘Whichever gets me to Andrea’s dinner faster.’

‘Headfirst it is then.’ Danielle nodded firmly. ‘And you’re still with Andrea? There’s a betting pool I ain’t winning.’

Herbert sedately seated himself in his chair. His pinstripe suit hung off him like his skin. The clothing was out-dated but somehow fitted to the environment of old leather and wooden floors. ‘Tell me, did you become heartless after Stuart left or is that what made him head for the hills?’

‘Point taken.’ She grabbed the paper and spun it around so he could see it, leaving her to do her corrections upside down. It didn’t slow her though, red pen striking through. ‘While this is news, we want to make this a human piece as much as this format allows us. Robert James and Deborah Stanton can’t just be a scout and private. Exploit them being so young and defending freedom and all that jazz. They need to be thought of as “our Rob”, “our Deb”. You getting where I’m coming from?’

‘You’re as explicitly vague as always, Danielle.’

‘And you’re as infuriatingly passive aggressive as ever, Herb, but do you get my point?’

Herbert’s cheeks wobbled as he first nodded then shook his head.

‘Just a tad paradoxical, Herb.’

‘I mean, I *get* where you’re coming from. I’m just not sure how to arrive at the destination.’

‘Taking the metaphor too far.’ Danielle leaned forward over the draft, tapping different parts of it. ‘Lean into their personal lives. James has a kid. Say that! Quintessential hard-working American, leaving his home to make sure others are safe. Stanton was set to come here to university after she finished her service. Her dreams cut short. I want people’s phone screens stained with tears about these people and all their lost dreams.’

‘Pull on people’s heartstrings.’ Herbert grabbed the paper. ‘Got it.’

‘Make me cry, Herb!’ she called after him.

‘An impossible task,’ Lucy replied from the desk.

‘And don’t forget to shut the door!’

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero: Most Recent Posts

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – y'all hear? damn those soldiers must be so scared
#saveRobandDeb #AliaSurat

IAmIronMan – were they american?

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – does it matter?

IAmIronMan – dont be sensitive zoe i was just asking

Becky24 – zoes the social justice warrior lol #politicallycorrect

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – *eyeroll* okay okay sorry peeps, its
just been some pretty hateful stuff lately on here

Becky24 – fair enough

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – the james dude was american. Im
pretty sure the stanton girl is alian. god thats sad.

BigBrotherLied – who knows? maybe theyve found the kids and are saving
them right now #stolenchildren #makeAliaSuratgoodagain

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – oooh, i hope so!!!!

IAmIronMan – after this long??? crazier things have happened i
guess. if theyre being murdered out there though our damn government
isnt doin anything.

BigBrotherLied – i feel you bro.

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly – im betting dead. we all know what those
people are like. theyve stolen children. no hesitation in killing good soldiers.

Area52Exists – unfortunately I think **I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly** has a
point. the only thing i don't understand how they did it. using spears still and
all.

SandersBriggs – come on guys. thats no way to talk. its sad. we all know how
a society goes to hell when it rejects religion and god. all we can do is pray
that the lord will come to them and they will release the children and the
soldiers, god hoping they are still alive.

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – uhhhhhhhhh guys? seriously?????

IAmIronMan – ooh look out!!! here comes the social justice warrior. hear her roar!!!

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – pretty ironic you saying that considering your username.

IAmIronMan – theres an idea! send iron man in. hell sort the lot of em out.

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – thats an idea i wont argue with.

Becky24 – or captain america. hed sort them out all pretty damn quick. won one war, win another.

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – i didnt know alia surat was at war???

Chapter 4

Natasha always expected the worst. A deadly dancer who knew when to dodge at just the right time.

But more importantly, when to fire.

Even the smaller things, she prided herself on being a few steps ahead of the next person. As first an assassin then a spy, it was a part of all her personalities she couldn't detach from. Did that make it actually a part of *her*?

So, when JARVIS took her down to her floor, she was expecting either an apartment decorated in the garish colours Tony leaned towards or the soft, professional tastefulness Pepper had.

What she wasn't expecting was a personalized apartment. As much as it could be in her case anyway.

There were no windows but there were four emergency exits as opposed to the two she observed in the penthouse, three if you counted the Iron Man platform.

The elevator on this floor could be blocked off with an actual, lockable door. Obviously upgraded Widow Bites were on the table. Batons sat next to them with the tell-tale blue glow her Bites had. She let out an appreciative whistle at the two, brand new Glocks as well.

Guess she would have some extras to add to her collection, many of which Clint would be bringing to her from out on the farm.

The furniture was minimal and coloured to fit into the gentle blue colours of the walls and lamps.

Blue represented freedom to her, sky and ocean leading to endless possibilities where she could escape any danger if she went far enough. She recalled when she had played personal assistant to Tony that in one of his vaguely existential questions, she'd somehow told him her favourite colour was blue.

It wasn't exactly true but it was obviously something he'd remembered. She supposed she had no reason to lie but when under an alias, it was second nature.

The other problem was she didn't know what Natasha Romanoff's favourite colour was so she guessed what Natalie Rushman's would have been. It was one that Natasha Romanoff quite liked as well though.

Speaking of which, at the other end of the room, there was a huge picture of her in Natalie Rushman attire, obviously taken during the time when she posed as the alias. It hung on a wall, complete with a desk, typewriter, Stark pad, notepad and an earpiece.

As she came closer, she spotted a Sticky note on the bottom right corner of the picture.

You know, for all your secretarial duties.

When she poked at the typewriter, she discovered it was a fake and actually concealed another Glock.

This wasn't simply a guest room Tony let out to whoever came to visit. This was a room specifically designed for her in mind. Or the parts of her Tony felt he knew.

A feeling of warmth that wasn't caused by Clint or his family came over her.

'You're not too bad, Stark,' she said. She took in the far-too-large picture of herself. 'Though you got a funny way of showing it.'

Natasha wasn't too surprised to find her kitchen empty, save for coffee and sugar.

And of course, two bottles of vodka.

'Yes, we get it, I'm Russian,' she muttered.

Food wasn't the thing enticing her out of her room though. She wanted to see more of the Tower. Get to know the layout better. Was JARVIS all-seeing or did he have his blind-spots? Did anyone else live permanently in the building other than Tony, Pepper, perhaps Steve and Bruce?

And, most importantly, where did Bruce hide himself?

'Is there a communal living area here, JARVIS?' she asked as she stepped into the elevator.

'Of course, Ms. Romanoff.'

It would be the best place to start then work her way around. The one thing she hadn't bargained on was for there to be someone in the common area.

Bruce startled upon seeing her stepping out of the elevator, dropping a jar of paprika. It smashed onto the floor, looking far too much like powdery, dried blood as it spread across the tiles.

The noise sent Natasha's hand springing for the new Glock nestled in the small of her back. Useless, but a comfort nonetheless. She noted the fire exit across the way while the elevator stood wide open behind her.

She stared at him, waiting for his next move.

He stared back, eyes looking larger behind the square glasses perched on the end of his nose. They were distinctly honeyed brown though.

No green. Not even a sliver.

His fingers wrung painfully together. So much so that she was sure they would bruise... if Bruce could even bruise.

The thought sent a shiver down her spine.

Still though, there was another part of her which reacted to the way he hunched back, murmuring apologies she could barely understand.

'Relax, Doc,' she said and forced herself to do the same, making her stance casual. She still kept her hand on the small of her back though. 'Just didn't expect to see anyone in here is all.'

'Yeah,' he mumbled, 'yeah, didn't expect, well...' He shrugged, deferring to her with a respectful bow of his head, edging away to slip a handful of glass into the garbage can.

It was hard sometimes not to get sucked into Bruce's timid physicality. But from personal experience, the deadliest of monsters wore the most innocent of masks.

'I think a dustpan would be more effective,' she mused.

She couldn't help but feel a spike of pity as Bruce blushed. He skittered back from the mess like she'd slapped him away.

'Good call, good call,' he said. He reached into a cupboard and brought out a dustpan.

Natasha took note how he ran his hands along the marble countertop as he did so.

That was... odd. But there was something so intimately familiar and gentle in the touch that it only stirred curiosity in her, not suspicion.

As he finished cleaning up his mess, she came further in. The scent of garam masala, frying onions and dhal filled her senses. Steam wafted towards the ceiling but was quickly whisked away by the ventilation fans.

Bowls were spread around counter tops, almost hiding the white marble. Frying pans and pots alike sat on the eight-burner stove, which Natasha felt was overkill, even for a place owned by Tony Stark.

The whole scene settled her. It resembled when she visited back on Clint's farm.

Homey. She supposed. That's what it was meant to feel like anyway.

'Snacky?' she asked, glancing over to Bruce. He absently ran his fingers over the kettle he'd just put on boil, adding to the array of bubbling, hissing and frying noises permeating the kitchen.

A tiny smile edged its way onto Bruce's mouth.

'Not quite. It's for the team dinner tonight.'

'You're cooking for that?'

Bruce's smile came a bit easier. Maybe a tad cheeky. 'You thought Tony would?'

'No, I thought he'd get one of his thousand private chefs to do it.'

She hoped the joke would pull Bruce further out of his shell; make him respond to her better.

However, Bruce's cheerful expression wavered.

'He doesn't have chefs,' was all he said, busying himself with the kettle. He didn't turn his back on her, keeping her in his peripheral vision.

It clicked he was waiting for her to move away from the stove. He wasn't game to move around her.

A part of her... one she wasn't very well acquainted with... wanted to stand there and block him just to be petty. It was juvenile and weird.

But the realization he was respecting her space made her move. Not many men did that around her. They used their bodies as weapons, moving in closer, trying to block her range of doing anything.

The ironic thing was she knew how to weaponize her body better than any of them ever did.

'Maybe I can get out of your way, Doc,' she offered, taking another step back.

It wasn't a retreat. She never retreated. But she was respecting his space as well.

Again, he took her by surprise when relief didn't flood his face.

'You're more than welcome to stay,' he said and actually appeared like he meant it.

'Okay then.'

While she remained before to prove a point to herself and Bruce, this time, she found she did actually want to stay. How out of sync with her numerous characters.

She liked that thought.

She was amused by the way Bruce edged his way around her still. She couldn't tell if it was in fear or respect but it was different from what she was used to, people deliberately rubbing up against her, whether to be sleazy or try to feel out if she had any weapons.

'So,' Bruce glanced sideways at her as he stirred, 'what brings you to these parts?'

It was painfully awkward and a joke... of sorts.

'Just having a wander,' she simply said.

When she went over to the fridge, he notably relaxed. He began to remove lids, adjust temperatures and add a spice here and there.

His fingertips ran over the smooth marble top, stainless steel mixer, even the handle of the frying pans and pots. His hands were constantly on the move, even when he, himself, was relatively still, running over his knuckles, pulling at his sweater. Sometimes running across his beard or through his hair when he was deep in thought about something, muttering about quantities and such when he was really off-guard. The mumbles only lasted for a second as he heard her open the fridge door, snapping out of his daze.

It was different from the way Tony often snapped, popped and clapped his fingers and hands, particularly when he was on a discovery trail, amping up a notch from his normal twitchiness.

There was something almost tender about Bruce's touch, like gentle caresses with capable hands, and she found herself relaxing the more she saw him do it.

She had never seen such gentle touch from... anyone really. The thought of what it would be like for that soft touch to ghost over herself was a foreign thought. She wouldn't know how to be that gentle naturally.

It was an interesting revelation to her. Despite all evidence to the contrary, Bruce was obviously a very tactile person.

Again, everything about Bruce contradicted itself. It was completely paradoxical to Natasha's mind which made the puzzle that was Bruce Banner all the more intriguing.

'What's this?' she asked, finding another sticky note in the fridge, this time stuck to a carton of eggs.

Written in tiny, but precise handwriting were the words, *Need more eggs. These ones are foul.*

Good lord, the joke was horrible.

'Since when do you write painful puns on sticky notes?' she asked.

It was probably one of the most straight-forward questions she'd ever asked him.

In turn, he sensed it too. Rather than his usual run-around answers, he said, 'Since Tony started it.'

He indicated behind him and sure enough, plastered around the kitchen were lines and lines of sticky notes, all in the same, frantic hand-writing as Natasha's note was.

One read, *You get me addicted to coconut sugar only to let it run out, Kermit?* while another stuck to the top of a microwave, scribbled *Note to self, Pep and Shrek: Did you know that heating up custard pots in the microwave isn't so effective?*

Written next to it, in what Natasha could only assume was Pepper's handwriting, was *i.e. messy.*

Tony had stuck another message next to it, saying, *You're so sexy when you're pedantic.*

It devolved into more M rating from there on in.

There was something so warmly quirky about it that it hurt in a strange way.

A familiarity, she supposed. A familiarity in the running of things, in being part of something.

'So I see,' she said dryly, covering up the way it unnerved her.

Bruce glanced at her again and as it was back in Kolkata, he seemed to see more than she wanted him to.

But, all he said was, 'Unorthodox but it is effective.'

'I'd say one of the less unorthodox things here.'

Bruce added a generous amount of spinach to the mixture.

‘Hungry?’ he asked suddenly.

She tilted her head to the side. ‘Could eat.’

He appeared to struggle with his next words. ‘You... want me to cook you something?’

‘You look like you have your hands full.’

‘That wasn’t what I asked,’ he said, glancing directly at her.

His glasses were fogging up a bit so it was hard to make out his expression.

She found herself nodding, not wanting to turn him down. In a weird way, she felt she owed him that.

For what, she didn’t know.

‘Yeah, sure.’

Bruce straightened, his face brightening from its usual squint. ‘What are you in the mood for?’

‘Sandwich.’

His lips twitched. ‘Care to be more specific?’

‘Toasted sandwich.’

‘I take it I can use a bit of artistic license with it then?’

‘I’m not a fussy eater, Doc,’ she said. It was one thing to be playful to try to get him to loosen up; it was another to keep on going, which would be closer to antagonizing. ‘Seriously, anything you want.’

Again, Bruce reacted in the exact opposite way she thought he would.

Hunching back down, he nodded. ‘Sure. I’ll come up with something.’

She leaned on the breakfast bar as he clumsily poured some coconut oil into the new pan, followed by the buzz and snap of gas catching alight. He huddled around the stove, refusing to look at her as he put a couple of pieces of bread into the pan, a gentle sizzle starting up.

At times, he appeared like he believed he could sink through the floor if he tried hard enough.

It was what made her say, ‘Can I help?’

Bruce looked as surprised as she felt saying it.

‘If you want,’ he said, edging to the side to give her room before nodding to a chopping board.

Natasha swore she was walking into the mist but refused to hesitate when she stepped beside him. She wasn't comfortable with the softly pulsing black light so close but pushed through.

Snatching up the knife, she made quick work of dicing the potatoes and tomatoes. It wasn't until she was half-way through slicing the next lot of vegetables did she realize that she'd never used a knife for something as simple as cooking. Not even at the farm. However, it was a familiar weight in her hands and she knew how to use it.

A redness felt like it sunk into her stomach. While she could dodge the dangers around her, she could never get away from the red inside herself.

Bruce couldn't have put it together why she knew how to use a knife. However, the more she chopped, the more he edged away from her, the more subservient in his movements, until she felt like she was figuratively towering over him.

It was one of the first times she'd ever felt in control when around Bruce.

It was also one of the first times she didn't want to be.

Interlude 4

When Deborah lost track of the days, she knew she'd lost hope.

She didn't have her mother's watch to tell her the time of day. That had been taken from her, along with her weapons.

The only way she'd kept track of the time was when she was fed. By the way she was rapidly losing weight and the number of times she fell asleep in between meals, she estimated they fed her once a day. Twice if her captors were in a good mood.

Whenever someone came to feed her, she would force herself to take the effort to make a mark on the stone wall which formed one side of her jail cell.

After 66 marks, everything melded together. She felt tired and weak, physically and mentally. No one spoke to her, no matter how much she pleaded, yelled and abused. First two at a time, her captors would come in but now there was only one. Hood over the face, the person would slide a tray of food through the slot in between the bars then leave.

That was it. Not a word.

She had shouted in the beginning. But now, the noise scared her more than the silence even though the silence messed with her mind more than the noise.

Insanity or fear? Was there any difference between them?

She watched languidly from her corner as someone brought her food in. Normally, she scrambled to her feet, desperate for the meal. It was always dry but she was supplied with plenty of water to rinse it down.

Today, she didn't have an interest in it.

The hooded figure paused on the way out, looking back. Deborah imagined she could see red eyes peering out at her but knew that was her imagination playing tricks.

That and food deprivation.

The silence was more repressive with someone else there. She watched closely, waiting for the person to inevitably disappear.

'You have to eat.'

It was the first words Deborah heard directed at her in ages. She was so shocked that she didn't think to answer, staring in awe at this person. This woman.

‘You have to eat,’ the woman repeated, turning around to face Deborah but didn’t remove the hood nor did she come any closer.

Now that Deborah realized she was female, she imagined she could see full lips moving in the depths of the disguise. The thought of the red eyes couldn’t be shaken though.

‘Why?’

She was long past something brave, witty or patriotic; she simply wanted to know what did it matter to this reaper if she lived or died?

The woman didn’t move for a while. If her face was visible, Deborah could imagine her emotions expressing their fight over whether to continue speaking or not.

‘Because if you don’t,’ the hood shifted and for a brief moment, Deborah thought she was going to reveal herself. But instead, it appeared to be a nervous habit of readjusting her clothes. ‘If you don’t eat that,’ the woman appeared to correct herself, ‘if you let that *spoil*... I don’t know if you’ll get another meal.’

Deborah could only stare. She didn’t know if she was too out of it to understand the obviousness of what the woman was saying or if it was that cryptic.

When Deborah didn’t respond, the woman shrugged.

‘Just thought you should know.’

The words were easy but she appeared to find it hard to leave, turning to look back all the time.

Deborah continued to lie there, staring at the bowl of soup and strange, flat bread. Then, she closed her eyes and dreamt of a voice. A strange accent, firm and deep, it held nothing of familiarity which would bring Deborah comfort.

When she woke, the tray was empty save for a few crumbs.

Frowning, she watched as a figure emerged from the entrance and slid the tray back out.

It paused again and this time, when she looked at Deborah, the outline of dark, deep-set eyes could be made out.

‘We’ll try again tomorrow,’ she whispered and disappeared before Deborah could begin to understand what this all meant.

However, she got up and made a mark on the wall.

Chapter 5

People in suits emanated powers Steve wasn't comfortable with. He preferred an army uniform. He knew and understood that type of power.

'Captain.' The man casually waved as he came towards Steve. This wasn't their first time meeting.

'Deputy Secretary.' Steve nodded, standing immediately. He had to resist the urge to salute.

George Arnold, the current Deputy Secretary-of-State, seemed to know though and grinned. 'At ease, soldier,' he said.

Steve did relax, but more on account of Arnold's easy countenance.

Arnold in person was completely different from what Steve pictured from on the phone, which had been similar to Thor's larger-than-life presence. Rather than a large man throwing his weight around in person though, Arnold was tall and lanky with a lazy walk.

Bucky would have hated it.

'Christ, can't people stand straight?' he would have said.

As always, the remembrance of Bucky brought a sharp longing to Steve and he consciously breathed in and out. In and out, like Natasha had taught him.

Arnold shaking Steve's hand brought him out of the spiral though he didn't welcome the touch. Who said he wanted to come back to this new world and not retreat into the memories of the old one?

'Just wanted to have a run-over for the meeting tomorrow. I won't be able to make it but Nigel will be running it. You know him,' Arnold said as he led Steve down the plush hallways, very different from the governmental buildings Steve was used to with S.H.I.E.L.D. He glanced pointedly at Steve. 'Everyone is still coming, yes?'

'Yes,' Steve said back evenly.

It was a fact not every official had been pleased about; Steve refused to have it any other way though.

He had a team and he was determined to make something out of it.

And maybe, along the way, he'd find a way to make this new life bearable to live in. As well as pick up pieces along the way of his old one.

Like Bucky.

‘Yes,’ he said again, more to himself. ‘All of us.’

Thankfully, the meeting didn’t last long and Steve got back to the Tower before it became dark. It didn’t help his mood though. While he knew the Tower, that didn’t make it a pleasant place.

Familiarity didn’t make a home.

Tony was in the lobby, an earpiece in, talking rapidly.

‘‘Sup, Boy Wonder,’ he said, throwing a peace sign Steve’s way.

Steve smiled, able to tell by Tony’s nickname that he wasn’t out for a rise today. He was after one less and less lately. Steve found he was actually starting to enjoy Tony’s company rather than dread it. They still weren’t completely cohesive but they could stay in the same room without some sort of blow-up every time.

Tony had even deferred to him over this program, asking if he felt it was a good idea. For Tony to actually ask for and respect his opinion was huge.

‘Hey, Tony.’

‘Red’s back.’

Steve paused, wondering if he or the person on the phone was being addressed. With Tony, who often had half a dozen things happening at once, it was sometimes hard to tell.

‘Natasha?’

Tony snorted, tapping on his earpiece, either pausing his conversation or starting it again. ‘Who do you think I’m referring to? Barton?’

Truthfully, Steve never kept up with Tony’s numerous nicknames so wouldn’t have been surprised if that was the case.

‘Natasha’s back,’ he said, feeling some tension ease from his shoulders.

A link he could anchor himself to. He didn’t realize how much he was looking forward to it until now.

‘That’s what I said.’

Rather than feeling irritated at Tony’s acerbic attitude, Steve felt a flash of guilt at how happy he was to have Natasha back.

He was grateful for the place and the resources Tony was giving to find Bucky. He enjoyed the mornings of running into Bruce, chatting to Pepper while she gathered her things to leave for work, or when he and Tony could just be.

But Natasha was a familiarity that held a touch of warmth. She was one of those people who were unbreakable and while he knew a lot of people didn't trust her, he did.

He found himself in the elevator, not remembering if he said goodbye to Tony, being directed to the common lounge room when he asked to be taken to Natasha.

He didn't expect to find her chopping vegetables next to Bruce in the kitchen.

Bruce looked over at her with squinted eyes, not appearing to notice Steve was there.

'Why did you cut the cucumber?' he asked her.

'Didn't you just ask me to?'

'I asked to you cut the capsicum.'

She shrugged indifferently. 'They both begin with c.'

'Okay...' Bruce said slowly, never one to argue and let her go about her business.

'Do fossils even get hungry?'

Steve was taken aback at Natasha addressing him without missing a beat. Her green eyes had the warmth Steve had been searching around for a while.

'You need to update your joke repertoire,' he replied as he came out of the elevator.

She looked him pointedly up and down. 'I don't think I'm ever going to get over the irony that Steve Rogers told me I need to *update*,' she said, coming out from behind the counter.

He wished he felt comfortable enough... no, welcome enough to give her a 'coming home' hug. But the warmth he and Natasha shared wasn't there yet.

It brought him back to the meeting he had this morning and the doubts he'd had creeping in. Now though, he was more bolstered than ever before.

This was the right decision. For everybody.

‘Stark!’ Thor waved. The scent of rain was strong in the air and only served to invigorate him more. ‘How fine to see you well.’

Below him, the magical lights of New York City wavered and flickered. Stark was walking towards Thor on the platform he had battled his brother. The wind was picking up more and while Stark was trying to pretend it didn’t perturb him, Thor could see it make him stumble.

He had to grin to himself. Humans were so tiny.

‘Herc!’ Stark clapped him on his biceps and whistled appreciatively. ‘Been pummelling any sea monsters lately?’

‘Only dark elves.’

‘No Christmas presents this year then, I gather?’

Thor stared back. ‘I am not privy to such information.’

Stark smirked. ‘I missed this.’ He gestured back to the building. ‘What say we carry on this rapport inside? Robin Hood’s still not here but he isn’t the life of the party so we don’t have to wait for him to start it.’

‘Robin Hood?’

‘We need to sit down and watch some movies.’

‘The movies are wonderful. My favourite is the one with the talking ship. I think a *Space Oddity*?’

Stark snorted. ‘It’s *Space Odyssey* and you aren’t allowed to watch that here. It gives JARVIS too many ideas.’

Thor clapped Stark on the shoulder and even though he tempered his strength, he could feel the way the human shuddered under him.

Tinier than what he remembered he guessed.

‘It is also Thor, not “Herc”.’

Tony winked at him. ‘You’ll get used to it, Point Break.’ He looked thoughtfully into the distance. ‘I think that’s my favourite one now,’ he mused before shrugging. ‘The night is still young. I’m sure I can think up of plenty more golden ones.’

Thor resigned himself to not understanding half of what Stark was talking about.

For now, he was happy to be carried further into the world of new friends and battles. He was surprised but happy to see Lady Natasha amongst them all. She was a

fine warrior and one he would never say no to warring beside him. In fact, all were here except for Barton.

Was his real name Robin Hood? Thor would have to ask.

The television was playing a vision on the far wall where Natasha sat, showing a muse by the name of Ellen DeGeneres that was popular amongst the Midgardians.

Stark indicated to a table full of food. Not quite a feast up to Asgardian standards but it was not meagre either.

‘Help yourself, Herc. Plenty more coming.’

‘Thanks to who?’ Natasha asked from the couch.

‘Not you,’ Tony retorted.

Steve turned away, refusing to get dragged into the fight as he poured himself a drink. Thor could not understand why; it was all in fun. Why not participate instead of exclude oneself?

He glanced over at the good doctor whose fearsome counterpart gave no indication he would be joining them today.

As always, Banner was never at ease. He would not be one aglow with happiness but Thor felt sorry for him by the amount of *unhappiness* he exuded. Even Steve, on the outskirts at the moment, was able to give the illusion of ease.

Thor was pleased though that despite the obvious discomfort, Banner relaxed more with the approach of Thor.

When catching his gaze, Banner did a poor impression of a smile. ‘How’ve you been, Thor?’

‘Very well. How do you fare?’

‘I’m here,’ he said but Thor couldn’t tell if that was a yay or nay to the question.

‘Clint, have you seen the dishwashing liquid?’

‘Why would I?’ Clint shouted down the stairs.

‘Because it’s not in the cupboards!’ Laura yelled back.

‘*All* of it? I bought three bottles last time I went out.’

‘I *know* but it’s not *there*.’

‘How should I know where it is? It’s not like I clean!’

‘Is that something you really want to broadcast? And... and all the toilet paper is missing too!’

He sighed. ‘I’ll help look.’

He threw two more shirts and a pair of jeans into the suitcase before zipping it shut.

That would do. And they were pretty clean too. Bonus.

Two steps out the door before a burst of giggles stopped him.

Coming from his cupboard.

He slid the door open. ‘You need to work on your heist skills.’ He held up one finger. ‘Rule number one: never laugh where the enemy can hear you. No matter how cocky you feel.’

He’d learnt that one the hard way.

Lila beamed up at him. Brown hair in pigtails. Big brown eyes like a Disney character. His little princess was always the picture of innocence.

It didn’t fool him; but it did melt him.

He crouched down and winked at her. ‘Where’s the stash?’

She placed her finger to her lips. ‘I’ll take it to my grave.’

His quirky, dark little princess.

‘Holds up well under interrogation. Smiles in the face of danger.’ Clint nodded approvingly. ‘Nice.’

‘Would Aunty Nat be impressed?’

He kissed her forehead. ‘Incredibly so.’

‘Enough for me to spy with her?’

He kissed her forehead again. ‘Not a chance.’

Lila’s lip trembled.

‘Make you a deal. I take the fall for your heist and steal you a cookie on my way down to the clink if you tell me where the loot is.’

Her lip trembling stopped. ‘Chocolate chip or raisin?’

‘Don’t insult me. Nothing but chocolate chip.’

Her grin was back in full force. ‘Thanks, Daddy!’ She gave him a hug and unfolded herself from the closet.

‘Where’s the loot then?’

‘Under Cooper’s bed.’

Taking it to the grave hadn’t lasted long.

‘Of course it is.’

Clint’s raid under Cooper’s bed was well rewarded. He discovered the dishwashing liquid and toilet paper. And the glass swan off the top shelf, Laura’s Psychology Diploma, Clint’s bathrobe and numerous other things.

Scarily enough, Lila was getting good.

Clint would like to claim it was from him...

‘Lila, don’t go climbing in the barn! I don’t care if Auntie Nat does. You don’t.’

... but if he was being truthful, it was more from Auntie Nat.

When he came downstairs with armfuls of random stuff, Laura didn’t blink.

‘More heists?’

‘If she asks, I took the fall.’

‘I’m not sure whether to be touched or worried.’ Laura sat down her laptop and wrapped her arms around his waist. ‘Should I ask if you’ve packed clean shirts?’

‘Maybe something you don’t want me to broadcast now.’

‘I was waiting for that to come back.’ Laura came in for a kiss.

He didn’t complain.

His hands stroked across her stomach. ‘Let me know as soon as you do,’ he said, burying his face in her hair. He got one last smell of it to last him for his one-week stay in New York.

‘I thought you already knew I was pregnant? Something about *heightened senses* or something.’

‘Humour me.’

‘I always do.’ She kissed him one last time.

The moment was soon broken by Cooper storming in and claiming that Lila had stolen his X-Men skateboard and replaced it with her old My Little Pony bicycle.

Clint glanced at Laura. ‘I’m not taking the fall for this one.’

It was harder to say goodbye than normal. Probably because he swore he was saying goodbye to four rather than three now.

When Clint got to the Tower and saw his best friend, all previous worries eased.

‘You’re late,’ Nat said, giving that smile she only had for him. ‘Should’ve seen that coming.’

‘I’m always where I need to be when I need to be,’ he said.

When it was critical anyway.

She hugged him tightly.

That’s when he realized she’d had a harder time away then she’d ever said.

He was pulled away from her by Cap calling attention. It made Clint remember they were all here for a reason. Not just to pal around.

Shame in a way. Clint knew how to pal around better than be an Ambassadorial Avenger any day. There was no job in the white pages for that though.

One day maybe. One day.

‘What do you think?’ Natasha murmured to Clint after everyone had dispersed after dinner into their own corners.

‘Pasta was a little overcooked.’

‘As if you could do better.’ She knew the pasta was fine. As with most things, she could pick up something she’d hardly ever done and do it competently. It was just Clint’s way of thinking he was being funny. ‘What did you actually think though?’

‘What I thought from the start.’ Clint shrugged, taking a sip of his beer. ‘Good idea.’

And that was her sign that Clint was drunk. He became even more laconic.

It ticked her off. Well, not really, but when some of her feelings became too real, anger was the safest fall-back.

She’d hardly gotten to speak to Clint. And by speak, she meant being able to not measure out each of her responses because they could be heard. But now she wouldn’t get much sense out of him.

He would appear sober to most people but she knew better; he tended to just sit and make withering comments to stir up people. Nothing more, nothing less.

Across the way, Thor entertained Steve with stories of his old battles and Steve would relate his own ones in kind. Like two old friends almost.

Tony was surprisingly quiet in a corner with Pepper, who had slipped in for a moment. She leaned on Tony’s shoulder, whispering in his ear, a perfect mix between

personal and professional. Tony had stopped tapping on his glass as he listened to her, relaxed and focused in one.

Next to Natasha, Clint had his feet up on the table, defences down. It obviously wasn't the first time he'd been back here since the New York battle given how easily he made himself at home and the familiar, friendly taunting he shared with Tony.

This wasn't the first time Natasha caught up with a few of the old crowd as well. She had sometimes passed Tony when S.H.I.E.L.D. was still running and of course, her and Steve's stint in D.C. She never felt as comfortable with them as how everyone was acting with each other tonight though.

She parted her lips several times to try to join in, but could never find a way that didn't feel awkward. And when had she ever felt this awkward to the point of not being able to speak? She couldn't remember.

It felt like the first time for a lot of things, things she didn't want to recognize and couldn't.

All she knew was, Clint's purple aura wasn't making her feel as relaxed as she thought it would.

And that made her... angry. Yes, angry.

No one would ever know. On the outside, she was forever composed. It felt impossible to let the mask drop if she tried.

She zeroed in on the one person who, of course, hadn't found his place in the puzzle of the social situation. Most likely, he never would.

Bruce was in the furthest corner on a little couch. In fact, if Natasha could have guessed, she would have said that the furniture was put there specifically for him. Close to the elevators and an unblocked path to the fire exit.

Fiddling with an empty cup of tea, Bruce appeared to watch everything while keeping his eyes on the floor.

This time, he didn't seem silently aggressive as he always did.

Instead, he appeared lost.

She patted Clint's knee. 'I'll be back.'

'Kay.'

Rolling her eyes, she made her way over to Bruce. He was subtly watching her approach. His fingers began to trace the outline of words on his mug.

She noted what was written on it. *Oscar the Grouch has got nothin' on me.*

‘Where did you get that from?’

The left corner of his mouth twitched. ‘Tony,’ he said, nodding over to where the other man sat, Pepper still leaning on his shoulder.

She raised her eyebrows. ‘That’s going to be your excuse for everything from now on, isn’t it?’

He shrugged. A fraction of the playfulness he had with Tony flickered across his face. ‘Maybe.’

His fingers stopped running over the writing.

Natasha would have liked to feel comfortable enough to sit next to him.

But, she couldn’t bring herself to get that close. It was hard enough when they were cooking but at least she was standing and had a knife in her hand.

For the first time though, she felt ridiculous feeling those things.

The fog came rushing in on her beam, making her realize how close she could get to losing her balance around him.

Bruce was clever, which made him more than a physical threat. She couldn’t afford to forget that.

‘Can I get you a refill?’ she offered.

‘Thanks,’ he said, voice filled with pleasant surprise. He met her eyes and his face was naked to her for a moment, filled with hope and uncertainty all in one.

She took the cup without a word, not bothering to ask what he took. As with everything, she knew how he liked his tea because she never stopped observing.

As she waited for the kettle to boil, she ran her fingers over the letters as well, taking note of how they were emboldened out from the cup. It was warm and slightly damp from sweat. A physical sign left behind of stress or guilt.

Around her, Thor burst into laughter at a story Steve told. Steve grinned, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. Tony and Pepper were in their own world together.

Clint wolf-whistled them. Tony went to give an obscene hand gesture but Pepper grabbed his arm to stop him, laughing.

‘She’s right,’ Clint called, ‘you’ll give Steve a heart attack if you do things like that in front of his innocent eyes.’

Steve groaned while Thor sat up, proclaiming, ‘I sense an interesting tale there, Barton!’

Natasha watched it all play out in front of her. It felt at times as if she was viewing a movie and wished, just for a few seconds, she could pause it.

Her senses pricked, feeling something on her skin.

Flicking her eyes up, she caught Bruce looking down, back to studying the floor. Just like he'd always been but she knew better.

She didn't appreciate the gaze. Not as a spy.

But, it stuck with her that out of everyone tonight, he was the only one who seemed to see her.

That was what she kept in her mind as she brought back over his tea and sat down next to him with a cup of her own.

'Didn't know you were a tea fan,' Bruce mused.

'I like to try different things.'

'Didn't figure you for that type either.'

'Are you that type, Doc?' Five minutes. She was giving herself permission to sit next to him for five minutes. For five minutes, she was going to be here and not lose her balance.

Bruce breathed in the warmth of his tea. The creases, which appeared permanently engraved in his forehead, eased.

'Maybe,' he said. 'I like to try new things. Within reason, I guess.' He smiled, embarrassment colouring his expressive lines. 'Probably a bit of a dumb thing to say with the lives we have.' He huffed out an awkward laugh, shaking his head.

He was actually making more conversation than strictly necessary. It was very un-Bruce... or at least, the one she had been exposed to so far.

'Can anyone really apply the word "dumb" to you?'

She was flirting a bit, which was a programmed second nature to all of her aliases.

But he didn't preen under the praise. Instead, he shrunk back into the couch.

'Not to my face anyway,' he said.

Again, his soft physicality was something for her to behold. And be wary of.

'It isn't refreshing when they do say it to your face,' she found herself saying.

It was a joke, a kind of bittersweet one, a piece she had picked up from Bruce. The way he joked about something without it being one.

He looked at her directly for once. 'Why?'

She had to take a second to parse through their sporadic conversation. ‘Why do people insult me to my face?’ She angled her head in a way that she knew made her eyes look larger. It was automatic to take the position which made her look what was considered traditionally attractive. ‘Not the worst side effect of my job description, Doc,’ she said, mentally tacking ‘old’ before ‘job’ in her head. ‘I can handle name-calling. The shooting is more of a concern.’

He wasn’t derailed from her casual deflection though. A part of her thought maybe because he’d spent so much time with Tony.

‘But why that particular word?’ he asked, gaze more intense than she liked.

‘What word?’

‘I think you know what I mean, Ms. Romanoff,’ he said, though he didn’t appear disgruntled by her evasion that he didn’t let slide.

It was strange because, truth be told, they always humoured each other. They were painfully polite, with all sorts of hidden meanings under their words. While Natasha tried to engage him into a dance that she was comfortable with, Bruce kept side-stepping her.

Now, he was pushing her off-balance again by dropping the way they constantly edged around topics. She could never get into any sort of rhythm with him. It was all false starts, stilted movements and rigid sway that set her teeth on edge.

‘Perhaps.’ She refused to concede the whole way, letting it go only so far with a flirtatious half-smile. It fascinated her as well how he wasn’t reacting to her flirting. Most did, even if just a small bit.

He smiled back at her. His face always held a steady calmness, which she felt was the still water hiding the monster within.

Now, she couldn’t help but note the sadness there as well. It was so much a part of Bruce that she’d probably never seen him any other way.

‘Well,’ he traced his fingers along the words of his cup again, ‘if it was me,’ here, he stared into the distance, ‘I... I would never use that word to describe you.’

For once, she didn’t throw back a flirty reply, though she had it ready. Instead, she let what was said sit within her. Her feet were off-balance, not quite in rhythm to the beat, but she wasn’t upset this time.

Bruce hunched his shoulders more at her continuing silence. ‘Refill,’ he said with an awkward grin even though his cup was still half-full.

He scurried away from her, refusing to look back.

Realizing he wouldn't be returning any time soon, she went back to Clint.

He gazed up at her, hazy and soft. 'Where you been?'

'Just on the couch over there, *Hawkeye*.'

Pepper had left, leaving Tony free to heckle Steve about something or other.

Natasha wasn't paying attention. Thor and Clint joined in.

She let the conversation wash over her. This time, she was content to watch and not try to participate, holding Bruce's words within her chest, keeping the red at bay.

Interlude 5

At the beginning, before Deborah stooped to begging, she asked all the typical questions.

Where are you taking me?

Are you going to kill me?

What are you going to do to me?

But now, as she watched the same person bring her the plate of food who had spoken to her yesterday, she found she had a different question. She could recognize the captor from the walk, a slight quick-step, indicating a limp.

‘Do you wish you had killed me?’

The figure froze mid-crouch. The plate clanged against the floor but the precious food didn’t spill.

Deborah watched from her corner in the cell. For the first time, she felt hopeful. Not about escape, but that she might hear a few more words. Something other than the ringing of her own claustrophobic thoughts.

The figure reached up and for the first time ever, removed her hood.

Loose bunches of black curls cascaded around the woman’s face. Deep-set brown eyes made her stare more intense. The skin was dark enough to get confused with the brown cloak pooled around her shoulders. She seemed like an amorphous mass.

Shivers went down Deborah’s spine. She pressed herself back into the corner, feeling the old spike of fear.

The woman watched her silently. Then, she tilted her head to the side and smiled. She didn’t show her teeth. Was that better or creepier?

‘No.’ Her smile grew. ‘I don’t wish we’d killed you. Even if you haven’t been the easiest prisoner.’

She chuckled to herself, as if acknowledging how stupid this whole thing was.

Her accent... What was it? She pronounced the syllables of her words... Deborah didn’t know, *deeper* somehow, a roll of a tongue on some of them. She spoke softly but Deborah didn’t let that fool her. There was something quietly commanding about her.

But someone else speaking, even in a foreign voice, had eased some of Deborah's fear. Deborah nodded. 'I'm not writing home about your services as kidnappers either.'

The smile slipped from the woman's lips, which were larger, and Deborah felt, almost grotesque. They made her look angry, even though nothing in her position spoke to aggression.

'Kidnappers,' she mused. 'Never has irony been so bitter.'

'What do you mean?' Now that Deborah had conversation, she wasn't prepared to let it go, even if it all meant nothing.

But the woman was done talking. She slid the plate of food through the slit at the bottom of the cell bars then disappeared. But not before putting the hood back over her head and hiding her face, once again, from Deborah's gaze.

Chapter 6

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

Tony tapped out the code on his arm as the whole team (he mentally choked on the word, but didn't have a better one to concisely think in his head) waited in straight-backed chairs.

They were meeting a group of generals, Under Secretary-of-State and someone else—the president? Nah, Tony was pretty sure he wasn't there... on second thought maybe he didn't read the right folder—to discuss the Avengers participation within the system now that S.H.I.E.L.D. was defunct. (Or so they said. He wasn't above a good conspiracy theory.)

Ambassadorial Avengers. Good lord, it was straight off a cheesy postcard and sounded kind of... claustrophobic in a way that Tony was finding hard to deal with. Trapped into a deal with the government, something he'd been avoiding for a long, long time.

Pepper thought it was a good idea though. From the pitch they had forced onto Rogers then Rogers had forced onto him, it sounded like the team still would have autonomy and could pick and choose what they wanted to participate in. It was a form of safety though, working from within. Tony could get that. He just didn't feel comfortable with it.

Sue him, but he had some trust issues. Who *knew* where that came from?

Clint and Thor sat in the chairs across the way. Steve was pacing while Natasha leaned in the corner, far away from any window.

He upped the tempo of his tapping. He'd named it his Stark code which wasn't anywhere near as lascivious as it sounded.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

A swell of satisfaction loosened the tightness in his chest. This was his language. One he could speak with his 'bots, something no one could fight to take away from him because they didn't even know it existed.

Idiots.

The crazy thing was that he wasn't in the mood to verbally taunt the government today.

Maybe he was dying prematurely. Wouldn't be the first time. And working out the odds in his head, it was a 94.321% probability it wouldn't be the last either.

Bruce was in the chair next to him, even though Tony knew he hated being seated somewhere that didn't have a wall behind him. Hated anything open and airy. Tony didn't know if it was part of the whole I-don't-deserve-nice-things-so-I-shall-punish-myself-forever-and-so-forth thing that Bruce had going on or if he legit didn't like open spaces (agoraphobia, that's the word, he knew it was in there somewhere, amongst the stacks and stacks of shelves that he wandered through in his brain of stored-up knowledge).

So, that meant he wasn't hiding his anxiety as well as he thought he was. Because the only reason Bruce would be here was because he'd seen Tony starting to spiral.

Tony couldn't help but smirk when Bruce reached over but didn't touch. He always gave Tony the time needed to pull away.

When Tony didn't do anything, but patiently (yeah, who knew, Bruce actually somehow brought patience out in him) waited, Bruce, painstakingly gentle, tapped out a little pattern on the back of Tony's hand.

Tony's smirk softened into a tiny smile.

Because Bruce was the only one who understood the English that Tony spoke, he'd figured out the clicks of DUMM-E and U weren't random within the first week at the Tower. As were the patterns Tony tapped out.

'It's not Morse,' he'd said, for once, meeting Tony's gaze without any of his usual shifting and ducking, 'what is it?'

No interrogation, no accusation, nothing like that but curiosity, a hunger to understand, to know, to *discover*. The English that Tony more breathed than spoke.

So, Tony answered without doing the verbal dance around because Bruce was asking the right questions.

'It's my own code.'

And Bruce had nodded, not probing any further. He got that there were some things you wanted to keep for yourself.

But, he'd picked up a couple of patterns that DUMM-E did repeatedly, which was tap-tap, tap—tap—tap, tap-tap-tap or the other one which was tap—tap-tap—tap-tap-tap—tap.

The first essentially meant ‘Does not compute’, which Tony had thought would be funny for DUMM-E to say while performing activities perfectly. The joke kind of backfired because DUMM-E didn’t compute many things. Again, his advanced sense of humour even at fourteen had been a little too advanced, which tended to be the story of his life.

The second was ‘fire’. DUMM-E always seemed to view him as a bit of a pyromaniac and no matter what Tony did, he couldn’t get that idea out of his ‘bot’s head.

This was the pattern Bruce tapped out on his arm now, which was actually Bruce code for, ‘Are you all right?’

Two codes, one on top of the other. Tony wondered if he could write out a complete new code for Bruce. He probably could because Bruce had a whole other language that Tony got perfectly.

He would say he didn’t mean to brag but he totally did.

In turn, he reached over and tapped on Bruce’s wrist, just on his pulse.

Tap—tap—tap.

Fine.

Bruce didn’t know what it meant technically but it had become their unspoken cue.

Bruce didn’t look convinced because he didn’t have the best poker face. Well, Tony noticed that the more comfortable he was with someone, the worse his poker face got. So, Tony was kind of proud of the fact that it was so bad in front of him.

Paradoxical, but Tony loved a good paradox. It was right up there with his other loves, Pepper, irony and Las Vegas.

‘Are you ready, gentlemen?’ A senator came out of one of the numerous corridors, the one Tony clocked as Smith. Something Smith.

Probably better than what his actual name was. If it was John, Tony was officially walking out of the meeting.

‘Very much so, Senator.’ Rogers was there and already had his hand extended.

Of course he did. No one embodied the term teacher’s pet more than Boy Wonder.

Tony, for once, elected to stay silent (Pepper would be getting concerned by now... she was kind of paranoid about his health... who *knew* where that paranoia derived from) and let Rogers take the lead.

He was surprised to find Natasha beside him, eyes raking him up and down. Any other time he probably would have teased her about how she couldn't keep her eyes off him, but he wasn't in the mood for it.

She seemed to get it because she didn't say anything either but stayed by his side. That wouldn't have been a surprise because she was a pretty perceptive person. You know, spy and all that.

Immediately, with her closeness, Bruce slowed down until he was at the back of the pack.

It hadn't escaped Tony's attention he'd gone a bit weird since Red came back.

He glanced back over at Natasha, who was forever the right combination of calm and organized. Even when the world was falling down around her, he felt she'd forever come out on top.

In a way, Tony felt like he could never be a step ahead of her, no matter how hard he tried. And he was always about twenty steps ahead of everybody.

But, that didn't worry him too much because, hey, she could have killed him by now. And if life had taught him anything, that if someone was given an opportunity to kill him, they usually took it.

A fact which made Pepper equal parts angry and sad. She didn't get the humour in it that Tony did.

Now *that* was sad. He felt sorry for people not seeing the world coloured in his awesome humour, getting a kick basically out of being kicked. See? Funny. Regardless of how much it hurt.

So, the fact Natasha hadn't seized the opportunity to put him six foot underground (or made him into ashes or drowned him or defenestration or any of the other numerous, creative ways he was sure she could end his life) made him feel pretty good about her all round.

Did that make his bar extremely low? Ah, well. What could you do?

So, while he didn't trust Red with his deepest, darkest secrets, he trusted her to not kill him.

So that was pretty awesome in itself, wasn't it? He didn't get that a hell of a lot in his acquaintances. A little voice told him that was rather sad, but he told it where it could go with that thought.

In addition to all those facts, he kind of liked her. She was smart, a different kind he didn't have and any knowledge he didn't have, he admired. She could also

hold wit battles with him and not prance off in a huff if he one-upped her in one thing. Instead, she would give this little smile and wait for the next moment she could out-snipe him.

He liked to think he was surrounded by some support when he walked into the meeting full of people, people who were prepared to do what they thought was best for the country.

He knew how dangerous that could be though, thinking what you were doing was always for the best. He'd learnt that the hard way which was why now, he always felt like he was scrambling, re-evaluating, re-examining plans, to see if what he was doing was right, if it could be done *better*, with less lives lost, with *no* lives lost.

It was the only reason he was here. To re-evaluate, once again, to not get comfortable in the thinking that what he was doing was *right*, no matter how much he liked to joke about it.

He'd experienced first-hand just how much this all wasn't a joke.

Natasha, entering last, found there were only five seats on the opposite side of the table, across from two generals, two senators and the current Under-Secretary-of-State, Nigel Winston.

'My apologies,' a senator said, snatching a chair from the opposite side of the table. 'Here, take this. General Sussler can't make it to this meeting but sends his regards. You'll get to meet him in the future.'

Natasha gave a perfectly cordial smile. 'Thank you, Senator.'

Positioning the chair close to the exit, she sat down, legs crossed, hands folded on her lap. A perfect lady.

A perfect lady taking comfort from the Glock pressed up against the small of her back and matching bracelets which held her upgraded Widow Bites.

'It's nice to meet you all.' Winston stood up and swept a hand outwards to indicate to the people in front of him.

She took note that the sweep did not include her or Bruce who sat on the opposite side, in the furthest corner of the room. He didn't look comfortable at the confined space.

Winston was an average size with a prominent nose that suited the hard angles of his face. His brown hair was gently dusted with grey. He had a serious expression even when he smiled and gave a nod to Steve.

‘I’ll get straight to it, gentlemen,’ Winston said, making Natasha bristle the slightest bit more, as he leaned forward on the table, like he was getting real with them. She wondered if he learned that move in political class. Like, *‘Here’s a move that will make people trust you. Use it at your discretion’*.

Winston carried on. ‘The government took a hit in the Triskellion incident. Public trust is down into a negative scale more or less. And no sectors more than our intelligence. Our armed force officials are finding it hard to get anything green-lit. And even when they do, every move we make is examined and debated for a drawn-out amount of time.’

‘That shouldn’t be a problem.’

Winston blinked at Tony. Natasha recognized the wariness there even though he tried to hide it under a smile.

He should be wary too; Tony’s reputation amongst the officials would have had to be legendary. It used to be in S.H.I.E.L.D., everyone often laughing at how Tony could tell the brass to go take a flying leap and not be touched.

‘Please clarify, Mr. Stark,’ Winston deferred.

‘It shouldn’t be a problem to be watched if you aren’t doing anything wrong,’ Tony said, watching Winston unblinkingly.

He was holding himself back. Natasha realized that Tony actually wanted this to work out.

‘That isn’t my issue, Mr. Stark,’ Winston said carefully. ‘I not only understand the extra surveillance but expect it. Too many people were left unchecked which is what allowed HYDRA to spread throughout our government in the first place.’

Clint, who had been watching with his usual dead-eyed stare, pursed his lips at that.

Though he didn’t often talk about it, Natasha knew the infiltration of HYDRA through S.H.I.E.L.D. had hit him hard. He was meant to be fighting for a better future for his kids and meanwhile, he could have inadvertently made it worse by taking on missions that benefitted HYDRA all along.

So, this was the right thing for Winston to say here. Whether he actually meant it or not was something Natasha wasn’t sure about as yet.

‘However, when it is interfering with our effort to save people’s lives, I start to take issue with it.’ Winston slid a few folders over to their side. ‘Please, take a look. But keep in mind, this information is confidential and meant for your eyes only.’

‘I don’t like to be handed things.’ Tony jerked his head at Steve. ‘Be a doll and pick it up so I can read over your shoulder.’

Raising an eyebrow, Steve picked up the folder and held it out so Tony could read too. Natasha noted if Tony hadn’t offered to share, there wouldn’t have been enough folders to go around.

‘In a peace-keeping mission in the Middle East, a group of civilians were taken hostage.’ Winston seemed to feel the need to narrate what they were reading. Either he loved the sound of his own voice or was nervous at their continued silence. ‘We wanted to send an elite scouting team ahead to ascertain the severity of the situation and the best option to take to set about freeing the hostages.’ He bowed his head. ‘We couldn’t get the all-clear in time to save anyone.’

Beside her, Tony began to tap out a pattern on his forearm. The same one he had been using earlier.

‘How would our involvement change that?’ Clint asked. It was rare for him to speak in situations like these, preferring to watch from a distance. ‘We couldn’t do it any quicker if the red tape won’t allow us.’

‘That’s just the thing though. You wouldn’t have that kind of red tape.’

‘There are different laws for us?’ Thor asked, glancing between everyone.

Natasha noted he was understanding everything far more than he usually let on. If he had been staying with Dr. Jane Foster for a while, he had to be picking up a lot of things here and there.

‘No,’ Winston said, seeming nervous at the question. That, or Thor’s aura was intimidating. ‘But there are different levels of trust. And in your positions... well, there are certain leniencies granted. There have to be, if you are to function at all.’

Natasha could feel Bruce look over at her and couldn’t figure out why.

Winston sighed, as though this time, he was *really* levelling with them. ‘Listen, after the Triskellion, the public hardly trusts us. Hell, we hardly trust ourselves. But they do trust the Avengers.’

When he said the last word, he looked to Steve. ‘You single-handedly ousted HYDRA from our ranks and the people know it. Through all the double agents, standards and faces, you stood out as the shining example of... well, *right*.’

That cemented it for Natasha. She sat back and watched Steve closely for any reaction.

Steve appeared uncomfortable at the attention while Tony didn't even bother to try to hide his eye-roll.

'You are all strong influences in the public sphere.' This time, Winston chanced a glance at Tony, head bowed in slight deference in a way it wasn't with Steve. No, it had been more open fanboy with Steve. 'If we can get the public trust back in events, upper-management will be able to make decisions more freely. Hell, our generals and brigadier generals will be able to make some moves without having to refer to the Secretary-of-State for the minor things.'

'What are the minor things?' If the way Tony leaned his head to the side, staring up at Winston with an unblinking stare was anything to go by, he'd just said something wrong.

'When I say minor things, I mean the split-second decisions one has to make on a battlefield.' Winston sat back for the first time in the whole meeting. 'Something every single one of you can relate to.'

'Yet I'm pretty sure every single one of us wouldn't refer to them as "minor".' Tony leaned forward to look up and down the line of the team. 'Of course, I don't want to put words into their mouths. Thoughts, anyone?'

Clint nodded thoughtfully while Thor looked offended at the implication. Bruce steadfastly refused to make eye contact with anyone there and Natasha wondered why he was brought here. Was it a prerequisite of some kind?

Natasha didn't say anything and wondered if anyone noticed.

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. He looked torn, probably because he agreed with Tony but didn't know what to do because it was such a rare occurrence and felt against his inner soul.

Pretty much the exact way that Tony would have reacted if in the same position.

'A poor choice of words,' Winston admitted.

'But still your choice.' Tony's tapping increased. 'Tell me, was it your choice to meet in here too? Because, let me tell you, décor. It means something. You get us to meet in a dungeon and our thoughts might go a little dirty. Get us to meet here? We might die of mediocrity.'

Winston blinked at the couple of senators, obviously tacitly asking them how to deal with Tony. The one Natasha recognized as Smith from her Senate Committee Hearing gave a slight shake of his head.

That was the move which made black tendrils slink out of Nigel for some reason.

Steve cleared this throat. 'How about you continue on?'

It made sense for someone like Steve to be in a meeting like this. While he was down-to-earth, he was no fool and was level-headed. He didn't think he suited a life like this but in a lot of ways, he did.

Winston gave a nod before pushing forward another set of folders towards Steve this time. Tony didn't acknowledge the move, looking around the room.

'Here's what we propose. We have a situation where we are finding ourselves inept at helping people. You are a group who specialize in helping people and your specialties are going to waste.'

'Oh, for Christ's sake, get to the point,' Tony finally sighed, running a hand over his face. 'I had naptime booked into my day six months ago.'

Thor raised amused eyebrows at Tony while Steve's jaw clenched. Of course, Clint found the comment humorous, sucking in his lips to keep from laughing, while Bruce refused to look up.

A quiver ran through Winston's forehead. Something Natasha immediately recognized as the first sign he'd given he was running out of patience.

It was interesting to see how long it took for Tony to get on the nerves of politicians. Even with him trying to withhold himself, he still did it without even trying.

A talent she supposed, one Natasha felt she held but unfortunately, she wasn't in the position to tick people off whenever she lost her patience. Instead, she had to sit quietly and watch, with her legs crossed, knowing she could take out the fool who crawled along her skin, jangling her nerves.

Like now for example.

'We give you missions. Mostly scout and undercover. We don't want firepower,' Winston made sure to emphasize. 'We give you dossiers and you decide whether to endorse it or not. If you do, you oversee that section and use our resources at will. For example, with the hostage mission, if you would have undertaken that, you can use whatever resources you need to complete it successfully.'

‘And in turn, we announce the missions we endorse,’ Tony supplied. ‘Sometimes publicly, but mostly to your puppeteers.’

‘Secretary-of-State and Vice Secretary-of-State, yes.’

‘But freedom of choice?’ Clint pushed. ‘We don’t get forced onto missions?’

‘No.’ Winston seemed to be getting more comfortable, worried lines disappearing from his temples, and then nodded. ‘Though we will likely ask for specific members we feel would be most suited to the mission because, as I said, we don’t want firepower.’

‘Just permission from the public and monkeys in office to use it.’ Tony nodded, mimicking on purpose. ‘Good to know.’

For the first time, Winston actually looked Tony in the eye. In the back of Natasha’s mind, it felt like too perfect timing to be coincidence.

‘I know that in the past, Mr. Stark, the U.S. government have not always looked as though they cared for the people at large.’ He nodded and swallowed, like his next words were going to pain him. ‘And, I admit, they often haven’t. I’m not going to blame all of it on the HYDRA infiltration.’ He smiled, face still looking serious. ‘Though, I admit it is tempting. But I will say, the current secretary-of-state *does* care, which is why we are here. We’re questioning ourselves too and want to hold ourselves responsible. Steve Rogers held us responsible before and we intend to keep ourselves to that standard.’

Tony didn’t look away; it wasn’t in him to back down. Something Natasha could simultaneously admire and become frustrated with. Though, for once he was quiet and Natasha couldn’t tell if it was a way to give Winston enough rope to hang himself or he’d turned off because he didn’t want to engage any more.

Smith finally spoke in the meeting. His balding hair made his forehead and brown eyes more pronounced. The sharpness of his chin didn’t feel as distinct as it was to Natasha before.

‘We’ve meant what has been said,’ he said and Natasha realized how less intimidating he was without a full committee staring her down as well.

It felt weird how he didn’t even glance her way. She began to wonder if he even remembered her and the threat he thought she was meant to pose.

‘All missions we put forward are an open book,’ he said. ‘You are able to investigate as much as you want about them and we will openly answer. You can

reject them. Most missions we put forward will likely have a time limit on it so we would ask you be timely about it.'

'And what is the name of this... venture?' Thor asked, openly curious and Natasha could imagine why. From all his stories, this would be similar to when he was sent out on peacekeeping or war escapades in Asgard so of course he would be eager to do what he saw as helping. 'This proposal of two warrior teams coming together?'

Steve leaned over to him and muttered, 'Didn't you read the file I gave you?'

'If I did then I do not remember it.'

'Ambassadorial Avengers,' Winston chipped in, appearing more at ease again as opposed to the solemn seriousness he had when talking to Tony. He held up his hand like he was presenting the news headlines. 'A merger between the U.S. Government and the Avengers, working together to keep peace around the globe.'

'Nice.' Tony nodded. 'Did you get that out of your cereal box yesterday or this morning? Would have been last minute if it was this morning but you strike me as a semi-efficient human being. I'm sure you could've made it work.'

'Tony,' Steve tried softly.

'No, you know what, I've heard it all before,' Tony stood before turning his full attention on Winston, who didn't bat an eyelid. 'This sounds like a great way to get some of the most high-functioning weapons of this century on your side. Human or suit, it's a way of ownership without you having to actually own.'

Natasha flashed back to the hearing Tony had been pulled in front of and grasped where he was coming from.

'There are no contracts to sign here or handing over weaponry. Let me assure you, Mr. Stark, the only power we are trying to gain here is public and peace-keeping.'

'Well, forgive me if I have a hard time believing all of your bleeding hearts, Chuckles.' Tony slipped his sunglasses onto his face. 'Now, if you'll excuse me and even if you don't, I have that naptime appointment and I can't cancel it again.'

Steve put his head in his hand while Bruce actually moved, standing to follow out after Tony.

'We do have one mission already,' Smith called out. He pointedly pushed another folder across the table. 'You were specially requested.'

Natasha could see how much it pained Tony to pause in his flourishing exit.

Bruce glanced up at him. Something must have been communicated because giving a sigh, Bruce edged back.

‘Excuse me,’ he murmured as he leaned around Natasha and she could see the sweat having soaked through his armpits as he reached out to grab the file.

He gave a sigh of relief as he ducked away, holding it out for Tony to see.

After about two seconds, Tony snatched it out of his hand and turned back, ripping his sunglasses off his face.

Winston leaned away as Tony came back to the table, throwing the file onto the bench.

‘What fresh hell is this?’ he spat, for once not bothering to disguise his anger under indifference.

A general from the other side put up his hand, as though asking for permission to speak. Tony’s head swivelled to him and he hurriedly began to explain.

‘One of the brigadier generals sent through the information after a defector to the Ten Rings came in. Apparently, in one of the provinces, a Sun-Tao Yinsen is being held to help manufacture weapons for what is left of the group.’

‘I can see that, Gomer Pyle.’ Tony stabbed a finger at the file. ‘What I want to know is *how* is that possible? All relatives of Ho Yinsen are meant to be dead. I know because I checked myself.’

‘I don’t know what to tell you, Mr. Stark, other than that’s all the information we have.’

‘Well, why don’t you have *more*? Better yet, why isn’t Sun-Tao in your hands right now and *out* of theirs?’ Tony pointed out to the wall, as close to not-put-together as Natasha had ever seen him.

Smith remained calm. ‘Things are slow. We want to get a recon group together but the secretary-of-state is worried it might turn into a battleground on the province if we approach the Ten Rings.’ He looked pointedly at Tony. ‘We can’t afford that sort of publicity. Not now.’

‘Of course,’ Winston added, ‘we are interested in... *other* opinions here.’

Everything about Tony’s expression became hard. ‘Don’t make this political.’

‘Unfortunately, *we* can’t do anything to change that,’ Winston said. ‘We’re trying, believe me. That’s why we’re here in the first place. Believe me when I also say, Mr. Stark, you weren’t our first choice in this but we do recognize when we need to take a step back.’

Tony fixed him with a piercing gaze. ‘Only when you lose.’

That didn’t stop him from snatching up the dossier when he marched out of the room. Bruce glanced once at Winston and that... *that* was when Natasha realized what Winston looked like when uncomfortable.

Gaze dropping instantly, he crossed his arms as though he could physically remove Bruce’s gaze if he tried hard enough.

Bruce didn’t speak and instead, followed out after Tony.

‘I’ll take it that means we’re thinking about it,’ Steve said as he stood too. ‘Hopefully, we’ll have an answer to you by the end of tomorrow.’

Winston nodded. ‘In the meantime,’ he said, passing over one last folder, ‘have a think on this one as well. A terror cell in Lagos that we would like your eye on.’ He smiled over at Clint and Thor. ‘Three sets wouldn’t be a bad idea either.’

Nothing more said, nothing less.

Natasha got up and exited the door before any of the other men could. But she doubted the ones on the other side of the table had noticed. She wondered if the ones on this side even did.

Chapter 7

Natasha ran, finding herself in Central Park, dodging around joggers with dogs and tourists on obnoxious yellow bikes. Still lakes reflected the autumn leaves in the trees, providing perfect make-out spots that many teenagers claimed, oblivious to the odd disgusted curl of the lip.

She didn't care; she had to move, keep on and on and on, until she could hardly breathe.

Maybe then, she'd start to feel better...

It didn't work.

The crisp air of New York City felt like it was choking her; but then so had the crisp air of Gimmelwald.

The noise and hum of vehicles and people never stopped, no matter how deep Natasha tried to go into the clumps of grand oak trees. Just as she thought she was escaping into a never-ending forest, she would pop out the other side where a family picnicked or someone roller-skated by.

The anonymity of it all hit her. It should have been a comfort, made her balancing act in the fog feel second nature.

But there was no point.

And that kept coming back to her, in a blast of misty white light that derailed her more than the black tendrils. She knew how to dodge those.

The white though? She felt blinded. In every sense of the word, people blinded to her presence and her blinded to herself.

She had nowhere private to take a break but even if she wanted to, she didn't know how. Would crying make her feel better?

She hadn't cried in...

Well, there was that time in Norway. But it was to ease that spy's suspicion, the one she was trying to date. She didn't want to appear too put together when they had a slight fender bender.

God, she'd wailed then, pretending to be hysterical, even going so far as to say her parents had died in a car accident so she always freaked out if she was ever in a small one. The guy had bought it hook, line and sinker.

But other than that, pulling the ‘hysterical female’ act whenever in doubt when undercover, she couldn’t pick a time that she’d simply cried over something that happened to her.

It didn’t feel like that was something she would do. Perhaps to scream, yell or throw things. She remembered doing that once when playing the girlfriend of a mob boss. She was meant to have ‘discovered’ he cheated on her so she had to play the part he thought she would. After all, she had been ‘Serena Everhart’, a highly strung heiress so what else was she supposed to do except smash all the plates in the house?

Again, was it something Natasha Romanoff would do? She already knew the answer to that. But the more frustrating part was, while she knew what she wouldn’t do, she had no idea what she *would* do.

She kneeled on the grass near another pond. Some random was throwing a stick for his dog to play fetch with.

Was he out here to de-stress? Was this how he relaxed every evening, knowing what he needed to make himself feel better? Probably a huge animal person, something his friends would describe him as if called upon.

What would people describe her as, her little likes and dislikes? Did she like walking as a relaxation exercise or staying home and watching some trash television?

Well, in this case she had taken off, so she supposed that was something. But it still felt wrong. She only ran so she could hide her emotions from the others. Get control of herself to not show her hand.

Not show how bitterly lost and disappointed she was by the meeting; nor how forgotten and useless she felt because her very use as a human being had just been taken from her, or worse, not acknowledged.

She was invisible in a way she never was at Gimmelwald and that hurt.

Didn’t hurt Natalia Rushman or Serena Everhart or anybody else.

It hurt Natasha Romanoff and she didn’t know what to do with that.

Tony hadn’t been this amped up in a while. He had about ten holograms open, processing numbers, profiles and geographical locations in an absurdly short amount of time (even if he did say so himself, which he often did). JARVIS was scouring the net, looking for new information he could then delve deeper into.

Which was how he'd gotten up to ten holograms in the first place.

Breathe, breathe, breathe.

The tapping wasn't helping. Liquor would, had plenty of times before and if Pepper wasn't so opposed to it, would help in the future too.

But sadly, his stash was empty. Unless the supply included the cleaning alcohol Tony used to rub down his equipment in the workshop counted. Which, according to JARVIS, it did not.

He could go out and buy more but apparently, promises meant something to Pepper and he was expected to go through with them. So here he was, in his right mind and nervy as all hell. (Nervy... nervous... could they be used synonymously or not? Something he'd have to look up along with whether it was *a*-dult or *ad-ult*.)

'How's it going?' Bruce called out to him as he ascended the spiral staircase into the workshop.

Unlike the whole underground Bat-cave vibe Tony had going on with his previous workshop back in Malibu, this one was like a lair, overlooking New York City.

He would have made a fantastic evil overlord if he had decided to swing that way.

'Sun-Tao existed,' he threw over his shoulder, flicking through some pictures of the town Sun-Tao was allegedly being held in that he'd hacked from some government server that he couldn't care to log in his brain. 'I remembered the name. He was reported as dead in the siege Yinsen was taken in.'

Bruce didn't reprimand him for stealing the photos. He sat down on the stool Tony had been using until he had to pace around and manipulate the holograms because he *just couldn't get it out from under his skin*.

He switched his tapping pattern.

Cut, cut, cut.

Bruce glanced to his fingers then back to the information displayed.

'Any way it could've been faked?'

Tony bit the inside of his cheek to hide his frustration.

'Could be. I mean, the information is kind of controlled by the Ten Rings.' He glanced back at the familiar landscape on another hologram. One he'd been unlucky enough to traverse by foot. 'But why wouldn't they have had the son at *that*

encampment? It would have been the best kind of motivation for Yinsen. Wouldn't it?'

He hated not having the answer; it killed him there wasn't anything concrete, nothing to base his calculations on that would make them come out flawlessly.

Bruce nodded slowly. 'Maybe. Or maybe he was going to be leverage they used later. Or even he might've had use of his own. Yinsen was a genius surgeon, right?'

Tony felt comfortable enough to tap along his chest in front of Bruce. He could still imagine feeling the metal under the skin, covering up the hole which was left in his chest cavity after the reactor and shrapnel were removed. He knew he would never forget what it was felt like getting the injury and what it felt like having Yinsen perform the surgery on him without anaesthetic. Fixing him.

Saving him.

'One of the best,' he said.

'How old would Sun-Tao be now if he was still alive?'

'Just a teenager.'

'What could you do as a teenager?'

'About the same as what you could do.'

Bruce ducked his head as though he could physically dodge the compliment. Something he did too often for Tony's liking but he was planning on throwing it in front of Bruce's face until he got whiplash if that's what it took for him to finally accept facts.

Tony liked facts. It was one thing people couldn't manipulate. The problem was they were rarer when dealing outside of mathematics and with actual people.

It's why he usually liked facts more than people. Not every person. He wasn't going to stereotype that they were all manipulative backstabbers.

It was just most were, that was all.

'Here.' Bruce pulled up another stool. 'Sit.' His gaze flicked to Tony's fingers signing out his code. 'Breathe.'

'I'm not tapping out breathe. It's cut,' Tony felt petty enough to point out while not looking away from the read-out on Sun-Tao.

'Well, that's so much more comforting.' Bruce patted the seat. 'Sit before you wear a hole in the floor.'

'Statistically impossible. It's made out of a combination of—'

‘Tones,’ Bruce sighed, which was Bruce-speak for, ‘*Just please shut up and do as I say.*’

‘Well, since you asked so nicely.’ Tony fell back into the seat, arms crossed, glancing around at the information.

His gaze was for once held for longer than 3.3 seconds when a picture of Sun-Tao popped up.

Despite being only nine-years-old in the photo, he had a grave face like Yinsen did. Tony imagined they didn’t have much to see humour in. The kid had big brown eyes (not hidden by glasses, unlike Yinsen) that Pepper would have proclaimed as cute because she was one of those adults who thought all kids were cute even when Tony tried to show her pictures of babies that were legit ugly. She’d hit him over the head when he did then roll her eyes and give him a kiss.

Pepper-speak for, ‘*I love you even though you’re an idiotic genius.*’

Probably not the genius part but Tony was putting it in there anyway.

‘Not false information planted by Winston?’ Bruce asked, watching the picture as well.

‘When I hacked into the army’s servers, I was able to track where the message originated from.’ Tony swapped from tapping to rubbing his chin, tracing his fingers through his goatee before running a hand over his hair then going back to tapping on the subcutaneous sensors on his forearm. ‘It was actually from where Sun-Tao is being held.’ He bit the inside of his cheek again, adding, ‘Allegedly.’

They both fell into silence. The blue light of the holograms reflected off the polished surfaces of the workspaces. The rebuilt versions of DUMM-E and U were for once quiet, in their charging stations and their cameras were aimed at the two of them on the stools, as though respecting the quietness of the moment. Not complete though, with the hum of the machinery in general. It was that sound which allowed Tony to change his tapping back to *breathe* rather than sticking on *cut*.

Bruce glanced sideways at him. ‘Could be a trap. Ten Rings trying to lure you out.’

Tony stared ahead. ‘Could be.’

‘I mean... Yinsen said his family were dead.’

‘He did.’

‘You’d think he wouldn’t say that without being sure.’

‘You would.’

They fell into silence again.

Bruce scuffed a shoe along the floor before nodding to himself then looked ahead as well.

‘But you’re still going to do it.’

‘Just as soon as I finish hacking into the rest of the government servers I need.’

A ghost of a smile wisped across Bruce’s face. Tony liked to think there was a smidgeon of happiness within it, unlike so many of the other times.

‘Well,’ Bruce shrugged his shoulders as he rolled his neck from side to side, ‘you want some help?’

‘Federal offenses are usually more fun when done with two.’

Bruce softly huffed, his version of laughter. ‘Of course. Like cooking.’

‘Better than cooking.’

‘Five spoons in your coffee?’

‘That hurts you have to ask, Gumby.’

‘You’re right. I should just bring the pot.’

Tony clapped him on the shoulder. ‘There you go.’

As Bruce got up to put on the kettle, Tony enlarged the photo of Sun-Tao.

‘Don’t suppose you’d look at playing backup?’

Bruce set out the cups. ‘If they don’t want to start a war on the town, I think it’s best to leave the heavy artillery behind. Besides...’ he looked up with a smile that showed just how broken he was, ‘I think I might play better tech support.’

Tony knew there was more there than what Bruce was saying. But at the moment, he couldn’t divert his concentration from Yinsen’s kid.

And here he thought he was always good at multi-tasking.

Chapter 8

The night was slower for Natasha than usual. Even as the darkness ebbed away, it still clung to her skin, darkening her vision.

She should be moving from the footpath across the way from the Tower. People were starting to get about and before long, some officer would probably try to move her along, thinking she was either homeless or a weirdo checking out the premises of Tony Stark.

An anonymity she usually took pleasure in... a spy shouldn't be seen after all... but now, she felt like standing in the street and letting a scream rip. An irrational spike she always had and worked pushing past it but that annoyed her too. She knew she would push past it. She would never give into the temptation to be reckless.

Her attention was caught when someone in an army uniform approached the Tower.

She immediately recognized the garb as general. From this distance, she could see he was stout, balding head glistening in the small window of sun with his cap tucked underneath one arm and a folder under the other. A slightly protruding stomach but immaculate posture. She would have been able to pick him as some sort of army official even without the uniform.

She watched as he pressed on the intercom, trying to gain access. Even though she couldn't hear it, she could imagine JARVIS courteously asking his business even if Tony directed the AI to be insulting.

He was most likely requesting to talk to Steve or Tony. Maybe even Thor. Clint probably wouldn't get a direct meeting but he might be asked to sit in by one of the others.

And that's what finally did it for Natasha.

She waited for the general to gain access then a good five minutes after to make sure he wouldn't be there. Then, she crossed the road. JARVIS automatically unlocked the doors for her.

Then, she asked to access Steve's floor.

'Of course, Ms. Romanoff.'

Ah. So the visitor was most likely for Tony then.

It grated all the more.

So, when the elevator doors opened, revealing Steve standing there with an easy smile, she slipped past him without a greeting.

‘Natasha?’ he asked but she ignored him as she took in the room.

It was personalized like hers, even if Steve didn’t realize it. Because, as she knew, Tony could be subtle when he wanted to, especially when it came to emotions.

The furniture had themes of a light brown. Even the kitchen was wooden, giving it a softer feel than the crisp chromes and steel of most other areas of the Tower.

An actual desktop computer sat in the corner which was probably the oldest piece of technology she’d ever seen in the vicinity of Tony. Of course it would be out in the lounge room too, because Steve wouldn’t want something like that in his bedroom.

Steve liked a safe space, one where he could lock himself away from the new world from time to time, as she had seen when she viewed his old apartment. Unbeknownst to him of course. It had been a mission from Fury. Sneak inside and ascertain how well he was adjusting.

She’d done it without a second thought and reported what she had observed right now.

Invasion of privacy perhaps. Only a job for her though.

She knew if she was different that she might feel guilty about it. Even the smallest amount.

But she didn’t. It had been her job and she did it. Damn good at it too. Her report had started the process of giving Steve jobs that involved him having to push himself in the more modern world. He had to learn about cyber intelligence and adapted quickly. Most people thought the serum had improved his mind but Natasha had a feeling he’d always been whip-smart. He’d just never been in a position to exhibit it as much as he was when he played Captain America.

‘Natasha?’ Steve tried again.

‘I was never invited back,’ she said, not bothering to look at him.

She was insulted when Steve ventured a, ‘What?’

Jesus Christ, what were people taking her for lately? Seriously, her employment wasn’t what made her the Black Widow; her employment had allowed

her to use the skills the Black Widow always possessed. She needed to be given that avenue to use them.

She turned on him then, forcing deathly calm on her face. 'I wasn't wanted here by the Ambassadorial program. You wanted me here.'

Steve looked her straight in the face, all awkwardness dropped because he'd given up the charade he didn't know what she was talking about.

'Doesn't that tell you something?' he said.

'It tells me that I went into a meeting believing I was somehow going to be utilized only to be ignored.'

This time, the confusion on Steve's face was genuine. 'O... kay?'

She set her jaw. 'I'm an asset, Rogers. Not a liability. I don't need your charity.'

Steve put his hands up in a peace-making gesture. 'I didn't bring you here for charity, Natasha. I wanted you here as support. Someone I could believe in and trust. If you think the committee won't make use of you, you can be guaranteed *I* don't share that philosophy.' His gaze was painfully genuine. 'You don't have to tell me you aren't a liability, Natasha. Believe me. *I know*.'

The words should have been a soothing blue balm... after all, he was saying what she wanted him to... but it didn't make her feel better. He wanted her support in a similar way Fury did and shouldn't that have been a wonderful thing? He was saying that no matter what happened, she would get to be of use.0jh

But she didn't feel better.

If it was someone like Tony in this position and feeling what she was, he would have gone in for the kill. Saying something along the lines of, 'We aren't your Howling Commandoes, Rogers. No one's going to sing each other songs around the campfire at night.'

God, did she feel like saying that. Like Steve was forever trying to recreate a world and people that were far, far behind and she was simply being used as a cheap prop here.

But she didn't. Withheld herself. Didn't lash out, didn't become unreasonable, didn't scream, didn't hit, didn't do anything.

Instead, she gave a measured nod and disappeared back in the elevator. In a calm voice, she directed JARVIS to take her back to her floor. Then, she waited until

the doors had closed behind her and she put the apartment on lockdown to grab a decorative vase off the side-table and smash it into the wall.

One of the new Glocks clattered to the ground along with the vase pieces because of its hiding place being broken apart. She didn't care though and kicked it under the couch just because.

Then, she picked up the bigger pieces of the vase and smashed them again. When that was done, she grabbed the other vase off the other side-table.

'Ms. Romanoff?'

Natasha paused, poised in mid-throw. She looked to her left, right then up to the ceiling.

'Yes. JARVIS?'

'Sir is requesting to access your floor with a guest. If you are not preoccupied that is.'

She glanced around. Then, she slowly set the vase back on its previous resting spot, giving it a gentle pat.

'Tell him to come down in five.'

'The timer is set.'

By the time Tony came down with the general, Natasha was leaning casually back on the couch, all shards cleared from the floor and Glock tucked safely underneath her shirt.

Tony paused but only minutely. *'Sup.'*

Slowly, she nodded back at him. *'Sup.'*

He thumbed over his shoulder. *'Got a visitor for you. All role reversal here, me bringing you appointments.'*

He turned and bid goodbye with a theatrical flick of his hand. As he left, he tapped his fingers along the side-table where the vase used to be before exiting into the elevator.

People who thought Tony didn't notice things outside his own little world were idiots. Natasha resisted glaring after him, still trying to reel herself in from her rare moment of weakness.

Both she and the general glanced at each other. He was obviously thrown from Tony's abrupt departure so therefore, someone who had most likely never met Tony or spent any significant amount of time around him.

If it was any other day, Natasha would have offered her hand with a genial smile, enquiring what she could do for him.

But she didn't move.

The general finally appeared to recover with a shake of his head.

'Pardon me for the intrusion,' he said, expression soft and somewhat shy, 'but I had to speak to you.'

Up close, she could see his eyes were an average blue. Despite the straight-backed posture and uniform, nothing else about his persona felt like a general.

She'd come across this before though, people who shifted into something else entirely when not on the job. So, she didn't let the seemingly gentle side of this general make her believe he was any less of a strategist or soldier.

Making an effort to get past her current mood, she forced herself to cock her head curiously.

'You might have to expand on that.' Suddenly, she hated how easily she fell into the charming woman, slightly flirty and alluring.

As she predicted, the man relaxed more and laughed a bit at himself. 'I'm sorry,' he said, coming forward, holding out his hand, 'General Stuart Sussler.'

The name pinged in the back of her head. The missing general from yesterday's meeting. 'Natasha Romanoff,' she said as she shook his hand and kept her free one on her back, next to her Glock.

'Believe me, I know that.'

'Okay.' Natasha let the word be soft and encouraging. For once though, it coincided with what she felt on the inside. Her curiosity was piqued.

'I'm sorry I missed you yesterday,' Sussler carried on, seeming to move into his element. Stupid really, how quickly men relaxed around her, despite how public her rap sheet was now. 'I wanted to be there but an emergency came up.'

'I could imagine it would be 24/7 job.'

Sussler's smile widened. 'It truly is. But I'm so glad I caught you today. I was informed that yesterday's meeting had been a success and you were interested in partnering with the, uh,' he cringed slightly, 'Ambassadorial Avengers program.' He laughed again. 'I can promise we aren't married to the name.'

With this new piece of information, it either meant someone had contacted the government solo or the committee yesterday were already fist-bumping each other, thinking they succeeded with what they'd pulled on Tony last minute.

Neither one appealed to Natasha, but she decided to play along for the moment.

‘That was my belief,’ she lied comfortably.

‘Brilliant!’ Sussler enthused before producing the folder from under his arm and holding it out to her. ‘Because I have a mission here that’s perfect just for you.’

Natasha blinked at him then the folder. Then, back at him, seeking out the lie.

Sussler raised his eyebrows. ‘Let me guess... you don’t like to be handed things either?’

For the first time all morning, Natasha’s mood lifted. The mist cleared, allowing her to twirl into balance like she’d never stumbled.

Natasha could hear Tony and Steve going at it as she stepped off the elevator. Clint was eating a packet of chips on the couch while watching *Judge Judy* on mute with the captions on. Most likely, so he could still hear the argument. Thor sat near the window, looking on with Bruce next to him, seemingly asleep, but Natasha could see how he minutely stiffened as she entered.

She didn’t even take note of what the argument was about. Instead, she sat on the couch arm next to Clint.

Wordlessly, he offered her some chips.

She took them and just like that, he knew she was fine despite skipping out for the night.

‘Good sleep?’ he asked,

‘Great.’

In the background, Steve and Tony went on.

‘What’s up with them?’ Natasha indicated her head to them.

‘Tony wants to go his mission alone, Steve wants him to have back-up,’ Clint supplied.

As though to pile onto the point, Steve snapped in the background, ‘We have support, use it.’

‘Does every word out of you come from a training manual? Or self-help book?’

Next to Thor, Bruce gave a loud sigh through his nose.

Tony glanced over at him. ‘Problem?’

Bruce shrugged. ‘Do you want me to speed this up or do you need to get it out of your system?’

Natasha and Clint exchanged a look. Bruce wasn’t simply up-front that time but was actually kind of sassy, even snappy.

Upon closer examination, Natasha noted he was wearing the same clothes from yesterday, dress shirt now wrinkled and rumpled as much as his hair.

Was he... sleep-deprived?

The realization that he could be cranky from an all-nighter was so strangely human and bland that Natasha felt something shift inside of her.

Tony looked torn between ticked off and amused.

‘I’m not in the mood for cryptic codes, Jekyll,’ he finally settled on.

Bruce snorted at the nickname before shrugging his shoulders and saying, ‘Pepper.’

Four heads swivelled to Tony to see his reaction.

He gave one of the foulest glares.

No matter how Tony felt, if Pepper found out he could have had backup and didn’t take it? The ending wouldn’t be pretty.

Bruce had pulled the ace and Tony knew it. His fingers balled into fists before finally, he loosened them again.

It was pretty ironic that Steve would work on a thousand ways to win an argument with Tony and Bruce did it in one word.

Tony gave in. ‘Fine. What do you suggest then?’

Steve sighed. ‘I already—’

‘Not you, Boy Wonder!’ Tony snapped before jerking his head back to Bruce. ‘Him.’

Bruce blinked as Steve and Tony looked back to him.

‘I’m not a strategist, Tones,’ he said softly, glancing over to Steve then back at Tony.

‘Neither are you a chef but you still tell me how I should cook *toast*. And how you do it is in the word.’ Tony’s chestnut brown eyes glittered intensely.

Bruce appeared to recognize the look and sighed in resignation before rolling his neck around his shoulders, feigning stiffness.

‘I need to sleep,’ he groaned.

‘You can sleep when you’re dead.’

‘Charming.’ A tick of a smile pulled at Bruce’s lips. ‘Fine. Take him...’ Bruce pointed to Clint, which caused him to glance up from his potato chips with mild curiosity, ‘or her.’

Natasha was surprised to find Bruce’s finger directed at her.

God damn Bruce, always throwing her off when she least expected it.

‘Why?’ Tony couldn’t resist pushing.

Taking a deep sigh, Bruce closed his eyes. When they opened, there was a glint of determination.

For the briefest of moments, the black around Bruce dispersed and he seemed almost... normal. Human.

Then, the colours were back, slipping and snaking around his figure, but didn’t look as thick as before.

In fact, the colours didn’t even look black.

‘You need stealth. Steve’s already been requested in Lagos, along with Thor.’ At Steve’s shocked expression, Bruce shrugged. ‘You left your folder open and I’m good at reading upside down. Besides, Steve’s too much a symbol and he’s larger as well. He’ll stand out simply for being a big guy.’

Of course Bruce would be able to weigh up the pros and cons of a mission, strategist or no strategist.

‘So, that leaves Clint or Natasha,’ Bruce pointed out. ‘Both great at stealth, know how to blend into crowds and probably even have knowledge of the area from previous missions with S.H.I.E.L.D.’ He tilted his head back against the window, crossed his arms and closed his eyes. ‘Can I go to bed now without expecting to hear JARVIS calling me in the next four hours?’

‘Point for the Doc.’ Clint popped a potato chip into his mouth.

‘Yeah. Point,’ Steve murmured, still watching Bruce.

‘Better than yours,’ Tony shot back but Steve didn’t take the bait. Tony looked infinitely disappointed before turning his attention to Clint and Natasha.

‘So... who would less likely garrotte me in my sleep? Defenestration doesn’t worry me so much. I’ve had a few close calls with it so I know what I’m getting into.’ He quirked his head thoughtfully. ‘Not the most peaceful way to go but not the worst either, you know?’

That ticked Natasha off. The way it was Tony's decision. Not hers. His. The assumption she was nothing on her own but was only good to follow behind.

So, when she was able to say, 'Actually... I've got my own appointment to keep,' it was with the highest amount of satisfaction.

Looks of confusion crossed almost everyone's faces, except Bruce, who appeared to have fallen asleep leaning against the window.

It was Clint who got to voice his questions first which was odd, considering that some of the most hyper-verbal people were in the room with him.

'Come again?'

She held out Sussler's folder. 'Been keeping up with the news on Alia Surat?'

Clint's eyebrow rose as he took the folder off her and began randomly flicking through the first few pages. 'That little country way down the south of the equator?'

'Not actually so little,' Tony piped in.

'How would you know?' Steve grumbled, obviously still put out from Tony's previous throw-away comment to him.

'I know everything.'

'Highly debatable.'

'Then debate me.'

'I am not familiar with Alia Surat,' Thor put up his hand, drawing Tony and Steve's attention away from each other.

'Previous penal colony of England.' At Thor's look of confusion, Natasha clarified, 'Where Jane lives at the moment.'

'Ah, London,' Thor smiled.

It was close enough. Natasha wasn't ready to give a geography lesson to a demigod.

'Right. It was colonized a few hundred years ago and parts of it are still considered a third-world country. There's still a lot of tension there with the Indigenous people and they've never quite gotten there, financially or technologically. With the poor, there's a lot of violence, particularly in the rural areas.' Natasha shifted her gaze onto Clint after giving her brief history lesson. 'Apparently, a terrorist group has sprung into action and taken hostage large groups of children in the territory of Northern Hopes.'

Everything about Steve softened.

‘That’s terrible,’ he said, something endearingly simple and straight-forward in the manner.

It reminded Natasha why she found Steve calming. While he may do things that angered her, the intention was always for good.

‘Yeah,’ she agreed.

Clint flicked through the folder, nodding now and then. ‘They want your help in tracking?’

‘Part of being a good spy is being an excellent scout.’

Clint’s lips quirked at the familiar adage Coulson used to say to them.

‘They requested for me to take it.’ Natasha refused to let her voice rise in pride. She wasn’t deliriously happy to be made worthwhile. Not at all.

‘Guess I’m stuck with Stark then,’ Clint said.

To anyone else, his words would have sounded harsh but she could sense his happiness at seeing her vibrant again. He could see how she had become alive, mind already ticking over at the multiple approaches she could take to this situation, the hunger for more information, finding out more and more and more until she came upon the truth. The discovery, the high, the success.

All through her own hard work and it *meant* something to people.

It all came to a stumble though when Bruce said from the corner, ‘Is that really the best one to get involved with?’

It’s like he hadn’t meant to say it out loud but Natasha didn’t miss it.

‘Pardon?’ she asked, voice eerily steady.

He bit his lip, but pushed on, continuing his brazen run. ‘We were meant to be doing this so we could pick or choose our missions,’ he said softly, but it felt to Natasha as though he was shouting, screaming her down. ‘Not to take any one they want us to.’

‘I’ve chosen this one,’ she said, smiling, though it wasn’t one of those disarming ones she used with Bruce. Instead, it felt more predatory. She felt threatened by Bruce in a way she had never been before. So much so that she was no longer pandering or working him. She was scared, on the defensive more than ever before.

He looked at her and never had she believed he saw too much than right now.

‘Really?’ he asked, raising an eyebrow. ‘Because I’ve spent the entire night with a manic coffee-addict trying to decipher if every, single thing is kosher about a

mission. Who makes up the terrorist group? Do you even know the actual name of the Indigenous people in that area? Other than code threat number one?’

Steve and Thor looked shocked at Bruce’s straight-forward brutality. Clint looked like he was ready to shut Bruce up himself but had long learnt not to interfere in any of Natasha’s arguments.

Tony simply shrugged to himself and said, ‘Who knew Bruce was such a good judge of character?’

For once, Natasha didn’t feel in complete control of her emotions.

So, she was blaming that completely on what came out of her mouth next.

‘If you’re so concerned about the validity of this mission, *Dr. Banner*, why don’t you come along and witness it for yourself?’

Let him see what he thought about it when bullets were whizzing by *his* head and it was his split second decision which could decide the lives of people, let alone children? And how it felt when you made the wrong decision, seeing the blood in your dreams, sliding out of your ears and dripping from your fingers?

Bruce didn’t snap back. He always gave the illusion he was perfectly in control of his emotions but she could see a cold fire raging underneath his surface as he took her bait for once, calmly saying, ‘If the invitation is open, *Agent Romanoff*.’

Before she could lash back again, Tony clapped his hands. ‘It’s sorted then.’

She blinked and just like that, the haze was lifted. She wondered if she looked as terrified as Bruce did when he realized how raw they had become with each other. Their exchange had lost all of its courtesies and it felt brutally bare. Almost dangerous.

‘Come... come again?’ Bruce asked.

Tony looked scarily smug. ‘We all have our backup. Me and Artemis, Dudley Do-Right and Goldilocks, and finally,’ he waved happily at Natasha and Bruce, ‘you two. Match made in heaven.’

Bruce stared back, glancing between Tony and her with growing fear.

Natasha didn’t think she was faring much better inside, frantically trying to regain her balance, but on the outside, was keeping an apathetic air. No fog surrounded her; instead, she felt exposed out in the open, not ready for everyone to see her hand.

Her fears, for people to use and play on. For Bruce to see it all, realize his control when he already had too much.

Tony blinked wide, innocent eyes back at Bruce before involving Steve. Natasha realized Tony's agenda wasn't with her but with Bruce.

'I mean,' he said, 'wasn't that the idea? That we *all*,' here, he glanced pointedly at Bruce, 'have back up?'

Steve rubbed the back of his neck. 'Well... I mean—'

'He's right.'

Natasha was sure all eyes turned to her but the only ones she was waiting for were Bruce's.

'It will be a pleasure to have you on board. Dr. Banner.'

For a moment, she actually felt sorry that he was going to be the one having to deal with her out on a mission. He would no longer be thinking he was the only monster on the team once he saw what she could do out there.

Bruce's shoulders slumped. His fingers rubbed along the emboldened letters of his cup.

Natasha slammed her pity back. No. She refused to feel sorry for his defeat. Because, on the flip side, that meant it was her victory.

Wasn't it?

Interlude 6

Desiree was used to the ache in her stomach. It made her feel hollow on the inside and she wanted to walk hunched over, trying to fill herself in. Breathing was a natural effort, with the dust, humid air and starvation.

Biting into the dried apricot she had been given made her stomach ache more, but she kept going because eventually, she knew it would make her cramp less.

‘Hurts?’

Robin leaned on the wooden doorway. It framed the entrance to the little cave Desiree was in as her designated ‘room’. It was one of many, some much larger than others, that branched off the winding tunnels underground where the group had taken up their residence. While it should have been suffocating, Desiree took a certain comfort in being cradled within the arms of the earth.

Desiree shook her head as she sucked on the dried fruit.

A stupid question deserved a stupid answer.

Robin conceded this with a nod before sitting down on floor. Dirt stirred up around her but it couldn’t stain her clothes. They were so full of dust that they would permanently be that colour.

‘Been hurting you a lot lately.’ Robin indicated to Desiree’s skinny frame.

‘All of us are hurting more.’

She shrugged noncommittally. ‘Arguable.’

Desiree took another tiny bite, chewing even slower.

Robin was unblinking as she said, ‘Wouldn’t hurt as much if you had more food.’

‘Not hurting.’

‘I don’t deal with lying, Desiree.’

‘And I don’t deal with prying. Especially when it’s my decision.’

‘Fine.’ Robin pushed to her feet. Desiree observed she wasn’t as sure on them as usual. Probably had sores on her heels again.

‘Hurting?’ Desiree asked.

A rare smile crossed Robin’s face. ‘Fine. But if you weren’t sharing your food with a prisoner, you *would* be hurting less.’

‘My decision.’

‘So I’ve heard.’ She paused in heading out. ‘Know though, if it comes to you losing your life or her? That’s where I step in.’ She held up her arm where it was slashed seven times along the side. ‘My specialty, don’t you think?’

Desiree remained silent, chewing on her apricot until Robin was gone. Then, she swallowed and ran her hand along her own forearm.

The unblemished skin didn’t mean there were no scars. No matter how well she hid them.

Chapter 9

The Quinjet wasn't as comforting an environment as it normally would have been. There was no Clint winking at her from the other end or Coulson blandly asking her not to kill anyone she didn't have to.

Instead, the chairs were more cushioned and had a holographic screen next to each passenger seat to see the flight details, showing it had been 'Starkified'.

It wasn't wrong; it was different. But she didn't want it to be.

The most different was her companion across the way, looking uneasy as always.

Bruce was dressed in the suit she had found him in Kolkata, though it was distinctly cleaner. He had shaved. It made him oddly familiar even though he was a stranger to her.

Sussler had offered transport of his own but she felt more comfortable using equipment not associated with the government. While she wanted to be of help, she wasn't an idiot and didn't totally want to be at their mercy.

Bruce had agreed but at that stage, she felt he would just about agree with anything.

Including this mission. He'd given her as many outs as he could have possibly done. She couldn't figure out if his behaviour or her own stubbornness at not backing out annoyed her more.

It was easier to be more irritated at Bruce so she went with that.

Steve and Thor had already left; she knew Tony was still there but she somehow thought he was avoiding both of them. Probably more Bruce than her. Something she wanted to unpick.

Clint... Clint had finally come around before she left and wrapped both arms around her saying, 'Don't do anything stupid, Romanoff.'

'That's my line for you.'

And just like that, they were all right again despite his worry of her going off with the man who contained the Hulk.

When they reached flying level, Bruce sighed and closed his eyes. His fingers pulled at the ends of his suit jacket.

‘Guess it’s official now.’

Natasha cocked her head for him to continue then realized he couldn’t see her.

‘What is?’

‘That you’re crazy.’ A smile came onto his face. It wasn’t bitter like before but sad as he opened his eyes. ‘In another enclosed space with me? Really?’

She was shocked at the sudden openness but didn’t show it.

‘I have a few contingencies,’ she offered.

‘I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t think you did.’

‘You saying you know me, Doc?’ she said with a touch of flirtation.

Flirtation would send Bruce for the hills. He wasn’t like the other guys.

‘Perhaps.’

‘I don’t think you *quite* do,’ she responded with a wink.

‘Something we have in common.’ He closed his eyes and leaned back again.

Did he mean that she knew him as well as he knew her or that she didn’t know *herself* as much as him either?

The scary thing was that both were probably equally true.

‘I’m going to make sure I packed the extra Widow bites,’ she said, leaving without waiting for an answer.

Slipping through the door into the cargo bay, she calmed herself by checking all her weapons.

Putting her canvas bag back onto the rack, she noticed the other bags there.

Including Bruce’s.

She glanced once at the doorway. Then, she unzipped his bag and began to explore it.

Journals. No surprise there. If there was one thing she could guess about Bruce without having to confirm, it would be he was a reader and had to write his thoughts and ideas down. There was a folder with some dog-eared articles on Alia Surat. He hadn’t just bought them for the mission then. That was interesting.

Clothes. Not surprising either but there was a lot of them. And a lot for different climates, not only prepared for the heat that she knew the Northern Hopes area was renowned for. Maybe he was an over-prepper though.

No weapons either. He’d already packed his greatest weapon and could never leave it behind. A gun was pretty worthless in his hands and she couldn’t imagine he

would be the best of marksmen anyway. He was too nervy, never being able to hold his hands still.

Most items were par for the course.

Some things were... unusual.

There were a bunch of sticky notes that had random messages on them from *Get some more coconut sugar if you're going to make me addicted to it, Kermit to Did you know if Tony slept at all?* quickly followed by *Never mind*.

They were out of place. Along with an old wrinkled letter whose writing she couldn't read, a jar full of small stones and his mug.

These were personal, not suiting for a business trip or mission.

She glanced back at the doorway again before zipping everything back up and into place.

'Find everything you need?' Bruce asked as she came back in.

'And some more,' she said, sitting back down again.

'That's good,' he said slowly.

She smiled back at him, all the while feeling more alone than she had when starting out. 'It is.'

Interlude 7

‘Is it true?’ Desiree stumbled into one of the larger cave rooms. The only sources of light were two dull oil lamps and the lights on the radio equipment.

Sonya held out the headphones connected to the radio. ‘Hear it for yourself.’

Desiree took the object with shaking hands and held it to her ears.

The words kept on repeating, taunting her. She wished they were because it would have made it less real. More like a game she could remember playing as a child. A challenge before the battle, but all in a make-believe land where if she got shot, she could run and cry to her mama that they weren’t playing right.

Not one where she would be lucky to cry before stopping breathing.

She sat the headphones down. Two of the other women stared anxiously at her. The other sat with her head down, white hair covering her face.

‘Suggestions?’ Sonya said, biting the tips of her hair.

Desiree gritted her teeth before nodding. ‘We move faster.’

‘To death?’ Robin asked, picking the dirt out from underneath her blunt nails with a blunter knife.

‘To freedom.’

‘One and the same in this case.’

Desiree glared at her. ‘They have never been the same.’

‘Depends who you ask.’

Sonya shrugged before going back to sending an affirmative that the message had been received.

The mood felt tenser with the clicking.

‘We could fight,’ Robin posed, almost casual.

Desiree laughed mirthlessly. ‘You going to fight an *Avenger*?’

‘I can *distract* an Avenger. Enough for some damage to be done.’

‘We’ve been through this. We’re not doing that.’

‘Not defending ourselves?’

‘Not declaring war!’

Both Sonya and Robin blinked at her raised voice.

‘Sorry.’ Desiree ran her hands through her hair before clasping the back of her neck. It helped ease the ache in it from sleeping on the hard ground. ‘Sorry, just... not this conversation. Not now.’

‘Sure,’ Sonya said easily.

After a few moments, Robin nodded.

‘Thank you,’ Desiree murmured.

‘Sure.’ Sonya stood, dusting down her overalls out of reflex. ‘Going to spread the news among the elders. High alert and all.’

‘Good idea.’

‘Sure.’ She paused on the way out and gave Desiree’s arm a squeeze. ‘Get some rest, all right, Desiree?’

‘Yeah. Yeah. I’ll do that.’

She winked. ‘Sure.’

Robin was next behind her, keeping her voice low, but that never lessened Robin’s intensity.

‘They’re coming for those soldiers,’ she spat. ‘I told you. They won’t stop until they find them. Or their bodies.’

‘I’m sure a body would make them feel all warm and toasty inside. They would’ve left us alone for sure then.’

‘You know what I mean.’ Robin took a step closer, looking her right in the eye. ‘You look harder for someone who is alive rather than something you think is dead.’

Desiree felt hollower again.

‘And you are out of line,’ she gritted out.

‘Maybe,’ Robin conceded. ‘But I’m right.’

Desiree didn’t trust herself to speak. With a shaking hand, she pointed to the doorway.

Robin didn’t look happy but, thankfully, took the hint. Before leaving though, she leaned close again and said, ‘Think about it. Seriously though. For our babies’ sakes.’

‘I’m not declaring a war by leaving an execution on their doorstep.’

Robin snorted. ‘It’s funny that you think it’s up to you whether you want to be in this war or not.’

Desiree glared after her but knew better than to engage with Robin when she was like this.

‘Ever think you’re both wrong?’

She looked back into the darkness. The white hair still fell around Maya’s dark face but her withered lines and familiar kind eyes were now visible.

‘Every day,’ Desiree said.

‘Yet you still keep on going.’ Maya swallowed and Desiree suddenly became aware of how much dust was in the air and in her throat. ‘Brave? Or stupid?’

‘The two often intermingle.’ Desiree kneeled down in front of Maya and grasped her hand.

‘Not in my experience, it doesn’t.’ Maya squeezed her hand back through her slight shakes. ‘It’s whether you live through it or not lets you know which one it is. It’s high stakes, my girl.’

‘I know.’ Desiree kissed her hand before laying her head on the older woman’s knee. ‘I know.’

The hand running through her hair made the hollowness more bearable. ‘We can go back,’ Maya whispered, not for the first time.

‘Not now,’ Desiree begged. ‘Please. No more. Not now.’

Maya’s hand paused then started up again. ‘What day is it?’ she asked.

Desiree didn’t bother to respond because she knew Maya now realized. So, Desiree closed her eyes and lost herself in the motherly touch.

The woman was different today. Desiree. Deborah hated that she knew that but she did.

‘Thanks for the food,’ she said as Desiree slid it under the bars.

She never said thank you but today, she suddenly felt scared it might be taken from her. So, maybe politeness might serve her another few days.

Desiree nodded. She didn’t continue any conversation today. Never did she start them but she would always reply now.

Today was the first time she had come in with her hood down. Also unlike all the other times, she didn’t leave straight away. She sat on the floor, pulling her knees to her chest, looking so much like a little girl that it startled Deborah.

Not knowing what to do, she tentatively pushed the plate back out. 'Would you like some?'

It hadn't escaped her that Desiree's face had become gaunter of late. Deborah couldn't help but think it was because of her. It made her feel guilty, despite being the prisoner. Deep down though, she believed she wouldn't be alive without the other woman.

It was strange to be grateful to this person who was part of her kidnapping and segregation from her family but she did.

Desiree stared at her unblinkingly. Deborah didn't find the deep-set eyes near as unsettling as she first did but there were times like these that they still unnerved her.

Just when she thought Desiree wasn't going to talk at all, the opposite happened.

'Do you remember your mother?'

Desiree had never asked her a question before. She always treated Deborah with a gentle indifference, appearing to want to be kind but not connecting all the same.

Deborah frowned, also surprised at the pure oddity of the question.

'Of course.'

'No, but do you really remember her?' Desiree was more animated than ever, shaking her head and hands. 'Remember her the way you did as a child?'

Deborah didn't quite get what she was getting at but wasn't game to aggravate her more. 'Of course.'

Desiree frowned, as though seeing through the ruse. The animation went out of her as she curled back against the wall.

Deborah didn't know what to say. This was a chance though for a connection of sorts. Desiree had reached out, in whichever odd way, and if Deborah could take it further, who knew what options, what opportunities, she might be given in the future?

So, she found herself saying, 'I remember in the mornings when she'd cook me pancakes.' She resisted asking if the woman knew what pancakes was, because surely she did? The Indigenous people had been introduced to this way of life for a long time and would have indulged in the delicacies Alia Surat had to offer, surely? 'She always dressed up for it. She never walked around the house not properly dressed.'

When Desiree looked back at her, there was a spark, a curiosity, to what was being said.

It made Deborah wonder if she ever had something as wonderful and normal as a home life like her own. After all, it was well-known how the Indigenous people of Alia Surat lived long before the arrival of the First Fleet, so many years ago. Even after all these years, they could still never rise up to the living standards set by the new government, especially those in the rural areas like Northern Hopes.

Which was why Deborah had been out here in the first place, trying to bring about that change. Because, more than anything, she truly believed people like Desiree deserved the sort of childhood she'd experienced.

Deborah continued with more confidence, feeling encouraged by Desiree's response. 'Blueberry ones. Always blueberry ones. They weren't my favourite but they were hers. So I didn't say anything. It made her happy. You know?'

She mentally cringed at that, realizing she may have inadvertently put Desiree further off-side because how would she really know?

She was shocked though when Desiree nodded, some of the vigour coming back.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, yes. My mother used to sing this song to me at night. I thought it was sad but she thought it made me happy.' She smiled, full and large, for once showing her teeth. They looked blinding white against her dark skin. 'I couldn't tell her otherwise.'

'Yes,' Deborah nodded slowly back. 'That's... that's exactly it.'

Desiree appeared more excited than sad now. 'What else do you remember?'

'Um,' Deborah tilted her head back, 'she... she would dance. Put me on her feet when I was real small.'

'Mine too.' Desiree tapped her chest. 'Mine too.'

This time, Deborah smiled. The woman's enthusiasm was catching and she found herself leaning forward to see better through the bars.

'Cook your favourite meals when you were sick?'

'When she could. Didn't always have the money but she would do something. Make me a present. Find something for me. Even if it was a pretty rock.'

'That's... that's really sweet.' Deborah was filled with visions of an old woman walking around a run-down house, looking for anything that would make her

daughter happy. 'Mine would sometimes buy me presents. If it was a really bad cold. Or when I got chicken-pox. She got me a couple of toys then.'

'She sounds lovely.'

'She was.'

Desiree didn't comment on her use of past tense. Her expression just turned sad with empathy. There was something so touching and knowing in the woman's face that Deborah could feel tears pricking at her eyes at the thought of her old mum dancing around a kitchen, cooking blueberry pancakes.

She pushed the plate further back out. 'Have some. Please.'

Desiree didn't hesitate. She slid closer and picked up a piece of dried fruit, nibbling on it slowly. Then, she pushed it closer to Deborah. It sat under the bar, within reach of the two of them.

When she successfully fought the tears back, Deborah took a piece as well and taking note of the way Desiree did, ate the fruit slowly.

Despite how long the meal took and even long after it was finished, Desiree stayed.

This time, Deborah didn't feel like she needed to fill the silence and sat there, enjoying the silence with the companionship.

Chapter 10

Bruce used to enjoy air travel. He liked drifting off to sleep, not knowing where he was on the globe, changing every passing moment. For once, he enjoyed the unsureness of it all.

Long gone were those days.

He held himself stiff, shaking himself awake each time he went to doze off. This was the last place he could afford to have a nightmare.

Turn into a living nightmare for everyone then.

He could feel Natasha's eyes on him but when weren't they?

The Quinjet gave a jolt as the landing gear came down and the screens notified them that they were five minutes away from landing.

'Did you sleep?' Natasha asked.

Something else was in her tone. But, again, there was always something else with Natasha.

Which was what made this trip so damn confusing for him.

'Some,' he lied.

He knew it was petty but when she was constantly trying to pull every tiny string apart that held him together, he automatically pushed back however he could.

Petty. Yes. Uncalled for? Nah. He didn't think so.

'Doc? Bruce?'

'Hmm?' He zoned back in on Natasha.

It wasn't so surprising really. Bruce tended to tune words out. They meant nothing and were only used to manipulate him. Calm him. Soothe the beast.

He watched movements instead. The twitch of hand, a perfect tell for grabbing a gun. The flick of eyes, showing someone was coming up behind him. A crook at the corner of the mouth, hiding a cruel smile.

To try to track Tony's movements was overwhelming. But Natasha was a different case altogether. Her biggest mistake was in trying so hard not to give a reaction that it was a reaction in and of itself.

Her fall-back position with him was calm. Calm, calm, calm. It was ironically maddening.

He couldn't blame her really. Still frustrating though.

Which made him long for his old companion back at the Tower.

'You all right, Doc?'

'Yeah. Just tired.'

Contradicting with his previous statement but he didn't care.

Natasha thought he lied when he didn't so why not give her what she wanted to see?

'Okay.' Natasha gestured to the back hatch which he saw was lowering. They had landed.

'First port of call?' he asked, standing up, feeling a rush of muggy air from outside.

'Find an air con,' she said, grabbing her bag.

Natasha was funny when she allowed herself to show it. He liked that about her.

The red dirt was soft to step out into. A blistering red that temporarily took away Bruce's sight as he blinked and tried to centre himself.

The Quinjet had landed within the confines of an expansive compound. Bruce could see sheds with corrugated roofs, hangars and concrete buildings that would work as living quarters or bunkers for bombings. The largest building stood in the centre, its roller door pulled up, leaving its entrance open like a gaping mouth waiting to swallow up anyone in its vicinity.

He glanced to the side and frowned. 'You okay?'

Next to him, Natasha went still. She clearly saw something he didn't.

'Of course,' she said before pushing on.

He followed, feeling a rise of dread at the barbed-wire perimeter they had landed inside of and the plain grey buildings in the distance.

Homey. Real homey.

He spotted two soldiers standing on either side of the steel doorway that was on the side of the main building which appeared to double as the main hangar and command centre. He suddenly wanted something cold to clutch onto to break him out of the memories that brought forth.

With a salute, one opened the doorway, eyes lingering on Natasha then when it came to him, turned to confusion.

Bruce didn't blame him. He knew he looked out of place too.

The funny thing was, there weren't many areas he looked *in* place. The puzzle piece which never fit.

Huh. Kind of poetic if it wasn't just a bit sad.

'Welcome.' A man on the opposite side stood with a smile on his face, general hat firmly on his head.

Bruce assumed he was this Stuart Sussler Natasha had mentioned.

He knew the name well. Very well. He just didn't know the face.

'General Sussler,' Natasha said demurely and Bruce watched in fascination how she changed from someone so confident and sure of herself to almost subservient. Her stance shifted, her smile grew softer. 'I believe you would have heard of Dr. Robert Banner.'

Christ. Who hadn't heard of him?

He was famous. Yay.

Sussler said something to him. He responded noncommittally, too busy watching the tics in movements to hear the words.

Sussler's hand rested on his hip. Natasha often did that to him too. There or on the small of the back. He knew she kept a weapon.

'Agent Romanoff said you would be her back up. An honour, Dr. Banner.'

'Thank you,' he murmured.

Natasha fell into step beside Sussler and they launched into the logistics of the mission. He noted that Sussler said she wasn't meant to engage at all with the 'locals' outside of the compound.

'They could give me some useful information,' Natasha said.

'We've tried there, believe me.'

'I can be persuasive,' she replied, lightly pressing her fingertips to his elbow.

Sussler threw back his head and laughed. 'I bet you can!'

Bruce kept quiet and wondered if it would be socially acceptable for him to turn and flee.

The heat as they stepped back outside felt more oppressive than it did before. The dust was more stirred up and made it hard to even see the barbed wire fence.

Not that he wanted to see it but the invisibility of it all didn't make him feel good. It felt like there was a trap being set that he couldn't see.

He really needed sleep; he was more paranoid than his usual self.

Their quarters were two steel shacks not far away from the fence line. They were the furthest away from the main buildings and what he finally recognised to be rows and rows of soldier barracks all clumped closely together.

Natasha didn't look worried. In fact, Bruce thought she would have already figured out twenty ways to get out of this compound if she wanted to go.

It was something he greatly admired about her. She didn't ever seem to get caught off-guard. One of the reasons he felt somewhat safe around her.

The feeling certainly wasn't mutual.

Which was why he had his own plans in place.

He could feel Natasha's eyes on him again as he was handed his keys and entered his own shack. He should have said something; he certainly wanted to.

The problem was he never knew what to say. Tony usually filled the silence for him. And, finally, with Tony, he didn't worry about what to say any more.

It had taken a while. He could admit that.

Tony had especially thrown him initially with his movements. The man was here, there and everywhere; hands tapping out patterns, opening and closing files, leg jumping. What drove Bruce crazy at the beginning was that he couldn't decipher the moods behind the movements.

What were the true intentions behind them?

The only thing that didn't move when Tony spoke to Bruce was his eyes, keeping strong eye contact.

Tony's obvious genius made Bruce listen to some of his words. Then, before he knew it, he was listening to all of Tony's words. Tony's hidden smiles made Bruce relax because they weren't about secrets that could hurt him. Rather, Tony was getting a kick out of his own words. His twitching hands would grasp onto Bruce's shoulder, wrist, even playfully slapped his leg. There was nothing hidden or controlled about what he did.

Bruce stopped studying Tony's twitches and tics a while ago and now, listened to his words.

Nice change to his previous encounters with people. Not naming any names of course.

He took in the small bed, desk, chair and ensuite inside the shack. It was a cement floor with a couple of thread-bare rugs chucked haphazardly around. The

barred windows made it feel like a prison more than the barbed wire. Everything was a dull grey.

He was hit with a powerful loneliness. He knew where those feelings took him and they often weren't good.

Curling up on the bed, he stared at the grey, but he kept comparing the walls to the ridiculous swirls of purple and green Tony had his room painted in. He could remember Pepper being so embarrassed and trying to apologize for it in between her laughter.

The spattering of the dust on the roof was eerie and wrong. He wouldn't have liked it if it was raining though. That could get noisy.

JARVIS could mute the sound of the rain and even darken the windows if he didn't want to see it back at the Tower. In sleep-deprived delirium or nightmarish throes, he could mistake the droplets for hails of bullets.

If it got really bad, he often went up to the lab and listened to Tony happily explain anything he was doing while Bruce started to slip off on the couch. Tony would rag him out for it later.

The realization that he was homesick didn't shock him.

It outright terrified him.

'Damn it,' he whispered, sitting up and clutching his hands through his hair. 'Damn it all to hell.'

The pain was going deeper and he couldn't... get... it... *out*.

Snatching up his jar from his bag, the smoothness of the glass against his rough fingers felt calming.

It wasn't enough though.

He stumbled outside and was relieved to see there were no army personnel around.

Well. Maybe there was. He could hardly see a few feet in front of him. The dust stuck in his mouth, making it hard to swallow. It gritted into his eyes and made them water.

He kept stumbling around, kicking the ground. Only more handfuls of soft, red dust stirred up. His foot never connected with something solid.

After a while, he gave a huff of frustration and knelt down, grasping around. He wasn't too worried about anyone seeing him.

Obviously social embarrassment wasn't something high up on his priority list any more.

He didn't know how long he scrambled around on the ground, feeling a tad more upset than he thought he should. Unfortunately, he couldn't always help it when it came to his feelings. Sometimes, he wished he could rip them out of the equation. It would make things a hell of a lot easier for him.

Not to mention less dangerous for others.

But, he could also recognize where they had come in handy to him in the past. The fact he cared about keeping them under control was something in and of itself.

He startled back onto his haunches when he felt a presence before him.

Blinking up into the growing dust storm, he was able to see the person emerge out of the red.

Natasha was dressed down in pants and a loose shirt, watching him with crossed arms.

'What are you doing?' she asked.

No judgement; only mild curiosity.

He hunched his shoulders as he kept on feeling along the ground. His hands were almost completely covered in red, coating in the hair of his knuckles and fingers.

'Looking for a stone,' he said.

She didn't move. 'A stone?'

'A stone.'

She shifted. 'How long have you been out here?'

As he patted along the ground, a puff of dirt went into his nose and he sneezed. 'Ten minutes?'

Her face was impassive. 'It's a dust storm.'

'I am aware.'

'Ten minutes?'

'Maybe twenty?'

He was taken aback by the tiny smile flickering across her face.

There was a freshness present he never noticed before. A vigour that Bruce thought could have turned into a sparkle if given enough time. While Natasha was obviously an attractive lady, something she herself was aware of, it was then Bruce saw how beautiful she actually was.

It was an observation that hurt him somehow though he couldn't pin why.

She crouched down next to him and he became increasingly aware how close she was.

Closeness. It was foreign. He didn't know what to do with it, like he didn't know what to do with words sometimes.

Natasha pretended she didn't notice his shiver.

'Can I ask why?' Natasha never asked if she could. She simply did, searching and searching. He felt like she was trying to find a secret within him that he certainly didn't have.

But here, she was asking a permission to search and that... that meant something to him.

He wished he could share the truth with her but he couldn't.

'I just... I need it,' was all he could say.

She nodded and stayed where she was. After a few seconds, he chanced glancing up at her to realize she wasn't staring at him but searching the ground with her eyes.

She was looking too.

Well... that was... unexpected.

He was starting to get good at understatement. Hopefully that would start to transfer over to his other side.

Or as Thor referred to it as 'His other half', making it sound like some kind of odd marriage.

Natasha glanced back at him and there was that smile again.

'To your right,' she said, and he looked to where she indicated.

Nestled in the powdery red dirt was a slim stone, tiny, almost pebble level. What was the designation of weight where a pebble transferred into a stone? Or was it like a Jacuzzi and hot tub, as in all pebbles were stones but not all stones were pebbles?

Unlike Tony, he didn't let the prattle always going on in his head spill out of his mouth. But it was also one of the reasons why he would consider Tony his best friend.

Reaching out, he grabbed the stone and gripped it into his palm. It dug in, imprinting the feel of its surface on his skin.

He held it to his chest, willing all the lonely hurt out of him, just as he had learnt to long ago.

As a scientist, he knew it was a load of rot what he was doing.

As a human being? It brought him comfort.

In the end, wasn't that all that mattered?

Climbing to his feet, he stumbled back to his quarters. He forgot to shut the door behind him as he hurried to his bag and got out his jar.

He held the rock to his chest for a moment before he placed it in the glass container, making sure to screw the lid back on extra tight.

The door shut behind him and he turned to see Natasha sitting at his desk without waiting for an invite.

It was completely against the unspoken protocol she had with him. She kept him at an arm's length. He didn't blame her. At all.

He still had flashes of what happened at the Helicarrier. Mostly, Natasha's openly terrified face.

It was enough for him to have to wear a heavy jacket (something which helped with his over-stimulation sometimes) around the Tower the entire day when he saw it. Another hurt to try to remove.

Good luck with that though. It was here to stay. It was all here to stay.

He realized he was staring when she gave this little wave. She was obviously amused by his reaction.

Not her usual go-to when she surprised him some way.

Slowly, he tucked the jar away. 'Thank you,' he said and mentally cringed at how awkward it sounded.

At least he didn't outwardly cringe right? Would that have been better or worse?

'That's okay,' she said before examining the surroundings. 'Same décor as mine I see.'

Oh, so... she was staying? Were they meant to be like... friendly or something? Actual teammates of sorts?

He clutched at his sleeves nervously, disliking the grit of dust between his fingers and under his fingernails. 'Yeah. Pretty drab.'

'Did Tony decorate your level too?' she asked.

He couldn't tell if this was one of her prying questions. Usually, she went too still. Even her breathing grew quieter. She tried so hard to be unassuming but for Bruce, it stood out to see no tics.

But she hadn't done that this time. Instead, she had one leg propped up on the lip of the chair, chin resting on her upright knee.

'Yeah,' he said slowly. 'Yeah, he did.'

'Mine too. He hid weapons around the place.'

'That's... nice?'

She chuckled softly at that. 'It was. It was nice of him.'

Right there... that right there... was something natural about her. Her movements were always calculated while her words were so carefully weighed that it unnerved him someone could perfect human communication like it was a code to be cracked.

However, there were flashes of the real in Natasha that he couldn't help but take to. When she decided to be honest, he liked her brutality. In a way, she could seem the most real out of everyone. But then, she came back to trying to be... not so much an agent, but the one with the most information.

He, of all people, could appreciate the thirst for knowledge, but not knowledge which could be moulded to control people. And with Natasha, that was what she used her knowledge for. To better get the people around her to walk to the pattern she was most in control of.

Why? Who really knew with Natasha. All he did know was he had been a target of it. Still was. And he didn't like it.

Control had been tried to be forced on him one too many times. He wasn't about to let anyone manipulate him into anything ever again.

For now though, Natasha had been real with him. And she'd spoken kindly about Tony and real warmth bloomed towards her for that.

He felt like he owed a return for her openness. So, he pointed towards the jar full of rocks.

'That's just... something I do,' he said.

As pathetic as it was, that's all he could give her for now.

She focused back on him, head cocking to the side as she looked at the jar then back at him.

Something changed in her but he couldn't pick what.

'Don't worry about it,' she said, hopping up from the chair.

She opened the door and he could see the way she shivered even though there was nothing but humidity in the air.

Giving a wave, she said, 'Always nice talking to you, Doc,' before disappearing, shutting the door behind her. Leaving him sitting on the floor, crouched over his bag, like Gollum over his precious.

The subtle sarcasm coloured him with amusement. There was something distinctly *Natasha* about it that it somehow comforted him.

If it would have happened about an hour before, he wouldn't have had to go scrambling out in the dirt, looking for a stone (or pebble? No. Stone. Definitely stone he was safe to say).

But, if he was going to go through with his plans, he had to get used to relying on his old methods to get by.

Because he wasn't going to have any best friends or semi-friendly ex-assassins where he was planning to escape to.

Natasha expected to keep the high she'd been riding. She expected to be all down to business as soon as she landed. She expected to get back into the zone of her mission persona.

Strategic; focused; accurate.

Of course, she had been shaken on missions before. When Clint was compromised; losing Coulson; when she thought she'd lost Fury.

Losing herself or more, selves. Everything she'd ever worked for taken from her. No more missions, no more nothing.

So, she thought finding part of her selves again would bring it all back.

It probably would have if it hadn't been for the red.

So much red, coursing down her throat, blocking her nose and blinding her eyes, she felt she was under constant attack.

The dumbest of things was making her fall apart. Because it was bringing back things she'd long wanted to be buried.

The things she had to bury if she was meant to function.

Be a good spy. A hero of sorts.

The thought always made her scoff but it stuck with her, like one of those old Russian lullabies she heard in the middle of the night and lost the thread of as soon as she awoke.

She'd sat at her window of her quarters, staring out at the red, refusing to back down.

Become acclimatized, become acclimatized, become acclimatized, rang like one of her old trainers' mantras, scaring her but forcing her to push forward anyway.

That's when she'd seen Bruce. Weird, enigmatic, scarily-intelligent Bruce, scrambling around on the ground like a madman.

Wasn't the strangest thing she'd seen. Neither was it one of the most stable.

She didn't know what came over her to go out into that damn storm to find out what he was doing.

Curiosity, most definitely.

It had also pushed her to follow him into his quarters. She had seen him hug the stone to his chest before putting it in his jar. He'd watched her with such open fear. She had been surprised when he offered up information to her. And she had been equally surprised with her response.

'Don't worry about it,' she whispered. 'You need to take your own advice, Romanoff.'

She watched as the sky grew dark, finally hiding the red from her gaze. She wondered if there were any mountains or trees that the red hid in the daylight too.

It was only then she was able to finally sleep.

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero: Most Recent Posts

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – does anyone think theyre still alive? #AliaSurat
#stolenchildren

SandersBriggs – can only keep prayin i guess #justkeeppraying
Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – guess so

Becky24 – if anyone can help itll be the avengers #mericavengers
Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – ill give that a hallelujah

IAmIronMan – i feel like sending the chick is a bit rich. iron man all the way
man whatre they thinking?

BigBrotherLied – my thoughts exactly

Becky24 – i kinda thought shell do a hella job. i'm a special little
snowflake :p

Area52Exists – shes hot so thats somethin

Becky24 – not the only reason

BigBrotherLied - *tentatively raises hand* um, thinking the same
thing

IAmIronMan – still voting iron man

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – favourite avenger but i hope she
does a good job. for the kids you know

My-dog-ate-my-car-keys – Ill give the last one a hallelujah giving the
last one an amen

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – thanks love *hugs*

My-dog-ate-my-car-keys - *hugs back*

SandersBriggs – god will provide

Becky24 – religion aside i think the kids will be all right. the
government will take care of it

IAmIronMan – hmm like they took care of us

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – not just the government in on it
though. dont forget #mericavengers

IAmIronMan – point

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly – I know this post is meant for just fun but any of youse think its all kinda pointless?

Area52Exists – bout what???? Praying???? everyones entitled to their own beliefs man

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly - *rolls eyes* no not that.. but vengers and Tony Stank and Iron Man aside, can everyone really be saved?

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly - *Tony Stark.

IAmIronMan – im sensing an uncomfortable topic coming up. may be time for me to tap out.

My-dog-ate-my-car-keys – Im due for an online argument. only been about two minutes.

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly – as someone raised with christian values, i like to believe everyone is worth fighting for. but these kids have been exposed to so much. can they really be changed from what they are brought up to be you know? #naturevsnurture

BigBrotherLied – really not up to us to decide

Area52Exists – i get where **I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly** is coming from. hella expense for people we dont even know will turn out half all right

Becky24 – is this seriously even up for discussion??? were talking about CHILDREN here people! CHILDREN!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly – i didnt say don't save them. i was just contemplating the outcome of it all thats all. thinking ahead. whats next?

Becky24 – good lord we have philosopers *cough* racists *cough* in our midsts

Becky24 - *philosophers

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – i cant deal with this. not right now

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero has blocked

I_Believe_Ostrichs_Can_Fly

Area52Exists

BigBrotherLied – bit harsh

IAmIronMan – nah man. i feel her

Becky24 – i could've taken them Zoe. torn em in two

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – |

My-dog-ate-my-car-keys – Zoe??? you okay???

Becky24 – dont let em get to you hon. those kids will be alright and thriving like you wouldnt believe in no time at all. you just watch
#mericavengerswillsaveusall

IAmIronMan – shes right zoe. even if iron man isnt there

*smilesstupidlytryingtobecomforting

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – thanks lovelies. im okay. just need some time out.

Becky24 – yeah i feel you on that

SandersBriggs – damn did i miss the action, dont worry about those idiots Zoe. those kids will be all right and have the best lives ever when saved ☺

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – thanks guys ☺ <3 <3 <3

BigBrotherLied - ... soooo is anyone going to say anything about the whole Stank thing??? Seriously??? Anyone???

Interlude 8

‘You’ve been spending a lot of time in the cell with that thing.’

Desiree didn’t bother looking up from her writing. ‘Deborah. I’ve told you her name before.’

‘I tend not to name things which are disposable.’ Robin sat down on the pile of clothes which were substituting for a bed on the ground. ‘Like this shirt? Do you have a name for this shirt?’

Sighing, Desiree gave Robin her attention. ‘Don’t think I don’t understand your hurt.’

Robin plucked at the buttons on the clothes.

Desiree continued. ‘She was happy to die. She *was* dying. She was going crazy from having no contact with anyone.’

‘You mean like our “troublemakers” did back in the day when they were isolated?’

‘Don’t tell me stories I already know.’

‘I’m not saying you don’t know them. I’m saying that I think you’ve forgotten them.’

Desiree swallowed. ‘I don’t forget. I don’t ever forget.’

Realizing she’d pressed a button, Robin sat back and crossed her legs and didn’t comment any further. But she didn’t leave either.

The company was a nice one. Especially with her and Robin’s history, watching the other grow.

Until Desiree was taken.

Desiree could tell Deborah was always hungry for words, something Desiree didn’t always have the energy to give. But Robin didn’t need that and knew company without sound could be just as comforting.

Finally though, Robin broke it. ‘Sharney’s been asking for you.’

‘Yeah?’

‘Yeah. Bit lonely I think.’

‘What about Danny? How’s Danny doin’?’

‘Good. Real good. Trying to get into things he shouldn’t.’

Desiree laughed. ‘Real, real good then.’

Robin smiled back. The expression was tiny on her but still lit up her face.
'Yeah.'

The silence came back but it wasn't as soft as the last one. Because Desiree knew what was coming next.

'A decision has to be made, Des,' Robin said. 'One that you like or not, it has to be done. We can't keep the kids here forever.'

'The old people used to.'

'The old people had the old land. The resources aren't there anymore. We're barely making it by as it is. I can see your bones through your dress, Des.'

Desiree didn't argue that one. The pains in her stomach were constant. She wished she was numb to them.

Even as she finally looked across at Robin, she could see the normally sturdy woman was thinning out as well, her cargo pants hanging low on her non-existent hips.

'You and I should take some supplies and scout ahead. See what we might be able to set up further on with more resources. Who knows? We might even hit the sea.'

'And what happens when we do that? That's no escaping. No boats waiting for us, Des. We get to the sea and what? Wade out like lemmings?'

'I don't roll over and die, Robin. You should know that by now.'

'Yet you keep running!' Robin breathed deeply through her nose before carrying on. 'We shouldn't be running. This is our *home*.'

'We're not going to war.'

'We are already *in* a war. You just don't want to see it.'

Desiree refused to engage. 'Will you come or not?'

'You need me to carry the gun because you won't.'

Desiree's glare was deadly on her face. 'I always carry a gun.'

Chapter 11

It said a lot about Natasha that waking up to gunfire didn't scare her. In fact, it was the very thing she needed to hear to get into mission mode, the one facet of herself she hadn't been able to tap into.

Until now.

She was armed and out the door under thirty seconds.

The red dust was in the air but didn't make visibility impossible as it did yesterday. She saw Bruce across the way, in his open doorway, staring out at the barbed wire fence in the distance.

She saw the green in his eyes as they snapped to her. He desperately gripped the steel doorway.

In the background, gunfire rained but it wasn't close. There was a plane roaring somewhere then an explosion. Commanding shouts joined the cacophony but none sounded her name. In fact, they seemed to be going further away. But Bruce cringed, gripping the doorway harder.

She could see dents begin to form underneath his fingertips. The Hulk wasn't as far away as she hoped.

A spark of red did glint in the air then. But it disappeared as he looked to her again. The grey cloud she saw around him grew thicker.

She stooped down, located a rock and held it out to him. She wanted to make her feet move towards him but her sense of self-preservation kept her rooted.

However, to simply hold out the rock to him was against her need to flee. But another part told her if Bruce wasn't calmed, no amount of running would help in the long run. She had tried that route before and it hadn't come with the best of outcomes.

He blinked at her, green still prominent. His gaze flicked down to the rock then back up to her. If anything, he held onto the doorway tighter, seemingly confused as to her motives.

A revelation bloomed within Natasha which became a thread that she could follow. It had been forming for a while from all the times she witnessed Bruce and the way he interacted with his environment.

Two parts tore at her as she stood there with the rock held up in mid-air. To drop and run to the gunfire... or to go further into the mist than she ever had before?

Bruce cringed again as another string of bullets rang through the air. His back arched and his huffs of air grew more pronounced.

She darted forward and slipped the stone in between the gaps of his fingers. He didn't even have time to back away as she jumped around him and into the cabin within.

Trapped with her only exit where he stood or the barred window. It didn't feel like much of an option if in a few more seconds, it was no longer Bruce Banner standing there.

The mist blinded her at that realization. She held onto the thread tighter and allowed it to guide her over to Bruce's bag.

She could feel his eyes on her now and could imagine the outline of his back, shoulders, growing larger as they stretched and broke, stretched and broke, until they were unstoppable.

When she turned back, the thread allowed her to finally see him again, like looking through the sight on one of her old sniper rifles.

Rather than the monstrous, disfigured shape she was imagining, that halfway moment when Bruce was both man and monster, he was crouched by the doorway. He clutched the stone so tight in his hand that a sharp side had cut into his palm and blood dripped in between the gaps of his fingers and matted in the hair on his knuckles.

His breathing was still laboured. He watched her now with something akin to wild fear.

When she held out his prized mug, he didn't say a word. Instead, he hesitantly plucked it out of her loose grip.

His fingers ran over the emboldened writing. Over and over again, with the same frantic pattern he had been drawing on the steel doorway. This time though, his shaking eased.

They stared at each other and she felt there was so much he was trying to communicate, so much that he *was*, but none that she could articulate. It was ineffable.

The green ebbed from his eyes.

Only when his breathing evened, did she speak, her voice joining the noise outside.

‘I have to go.’

He nodded, expression weary but now soft. In that split second, it was the most she felt they had understood each other.

Then, she was up and stepping over him. He reached out and snagged the sleeve of her shirt.

‘Natasha,’ he said, letting her go as soon as he had her attention. ‘There’s a reason why HYDRA was able to form in S.H.I.E.L.D. with you there.’

‘Non-sequitur,’ she said with a half-smile but she knew it wasn’t funny with the growing roar around them. Even the land seemed tense, starting to whip the red sand up into a frenzy.

Bruce pushed on, a bit out of it. ‘There was good and bad. You were part of the good but there was bad.’

‘Bruce, I have to move,’ she said and against her better judgement, patted his hand. It was smoother than what she thought it would be. ‘Just stay low until I get back or you have orders otherwise.’

He didn’t protest. For once, Bruce seemed to want to speak but didn’t have words.

She was halfway towards the main building where some soldiers were racing out of when Bruce’s voice floated to her.

‘The bad happens away from the good, Ms. Romanoff.’

She kept running.

It didn’t take her long to locate Sussler in his office, dividing his attention between a digital map on the desk in front of him and some screens on the wall which broadcast the base and its perimeters. It was an average-sized office with the walls lined with bookcases stuffed to the brim, filing cabinets and a couple of chairs. It was as grey as everything else and the only thing that let in a different colour was a skylight in the roof. It was a dumb design for a number of reasons, but mostly that he would be easier to assassinate.

She should know.

He spotted her and she saw it take him a second to remember who she was. He smiled grimly when he did.

‘Welcome to Alia Surat,’ he said dryly. ‘You actually got to sleep in before the daily gunfire.’

‘This happen often?’ She glanced over the map, taking note of a highlighted area tagged as Sierra.

He shrugged. ‘More or less, ever since Nhuungku,’ he said.

He snatched up some folders and jerked his head. ‘Looks like your briefing will have to be a mobile one. I planned to have a sit-down this morning but... well, the world has different plans.’

‘Whatever suits.’ She fell into step beside him.

He handed her a folder. ‘That’s everything we know about the Nhuungku terrorist group,’ he said, taking no notice as soldiers frantically saluted him before scurrying on their way. Despite all the flurry, there weren’t any alarms going off so Natasha assumed that while something had been tripped, no lines had been crossed or bases breached.

Natasha quickly flicked through the folder, taking note of grainy photos depicting hooded figures. ‘How many approximately in the cell?’

Sussler grimaced. ‘Hard to say. They are very adept at ambush.’ He shrugged. ‘After all, they know the land best. I would put it between one hundred and maybe even closer to three hundred.’

The comment about them knowing the land best struck Natasha as odd but she pushed on.

‘How well armed are they?’

‘Very. In the ambushes, they have taken many soldiers’ weapons and even taken down convoys. We don’t know how adept they are with the firearms though. They seem to stick to more primitive weapons. I can only assume they must be learning more about them though.’

‘Learning?’

‘The northern communities of the Indigenous people have been naturally aggressive towards the Alia Surat government for a long time. They were made clean communities of weapons. No one was allowed to own a firearm for fear of this very thing.’

‘So no experience then.’

‘None before this, that I’m aware of. There were some illegal purchases of course. Lead to some shocking exchanges between the police and community.’

‘How many civilians were killed in the clashes?’

Sussler frowned. ‘I don’t have the numbers on me, Agent Romanoff.’

‘What about police?’

‘In one of the biggest clashes, about five.’

Natasha forced herself to continue, soaking up the information as fast as she walked alongside Sussler.

‘Let me know about the operation you had going on before the terrorist group appeared.’

She’d read it but thought it would be good to hear it straight from the general’s mouth. He might have a different reading on it than she did.

All information, even biased, was something she could work with.

‘Intervention for the Future Generations?’ He was more confident now. ‘It was mostly here in Northern Hopes. Not much elsewhere. Alia Surat isn’t third world everywhere. But here...’ he sighed, taking off his general’s cap, rubbing his balding head before putting it back on and continuing, ‘there was a lot of abuse happening. A lot. And the first to suffer are always the most innocent. The kids. If they were going to have any future, the government realized we had to intervene. Big time. So, that’s what we did.’

Natasha could have done without the theatrics... she wasn’t a government official he was trying to win over with a supporting vote... but she allowed him to go on.

‘That’s when we started the Intervention. A full-scale operation rescue of the kids and place them with good families where possible. Wasn’t always possible to find families to take them... they had a lot of issues you see... but better than being abused.’

‘Of course.’

Sussler looked at her then and for a brief second, it was like he didn’t recognize her again.

‘And that was where Nhuungku came in?’

Sussler hit a button and before she knew it, they were striding outdoors, barracks to her left and the nerve and command centres to her right. The gunfire was now quiet but the air was muggier. Small factions of soldiers were lining up outside a row of three hangars up ahead, appearing to be sorted into squadrons. One lot in particular caught her eye as she noted they were equipped with shovels.

Sussler talking stopped her from examining further.

‘Not straight away.’ Sussler shook his head. ‘There was some fighting. People even killed their children before we could save them when they realized what was happening.’

It was that information which made the ice settle in Natasha’s chest. Even the red hadn’t done that to her.

She was happy Sussler carried on without her having to prompt him. She didn’t want to have to pretend she was okay.

Because there was no way in the world she could actually be okay given that bit of information. She was reminded of the expendability of little girls who couldn’t get their hands to stop shaking when aiming a gun.

‘Initially there were big clashes. But it was after about two months we realized there was real pushback. Organized pushback. That’s when our convoys were robbed. Or they were ambushed on the way to one of the targets. It was in the middle of one of our interventions though, that’s when it all went to hell.’

Natasha didn’t say anything.

Sussler was a talker; she could tell that within the first five minutes of knowing him. Talkers always worked best for her.

‘Sierra,’ he said and Natasha flashed back to the map she had seen. The highlighted area contained no mountains or roads or anything close by for that matter. It was in the middle of the desert, that expanse of red dirt surrounding it on all sides.

‘We got a distress call.’ Sussler bowed his head. ‘We found the bodies of our soldiers. Only two made it out alive.’

‘What about the residents?’

‘A few bodies. But mostly, they were gone.’

‘The kids?’

‘Every single one. Gone. There wasn’t a single body of a child.’

The ice felt bearable in Natasha’s chest but she knew it was going to stay there for a while.

‘How do you know this was by this group?’

‘From the witnesses and one defining characteristic. They always only see women.’

That made her pause for a fraction of a second longer. ‘An all-female terrorist group?’

That hadn't been in the profile.

Sussler smiled as though she had made a joke. 'It seems always female fighters on the outer. Could be some males in the inner circle.'

'Sure.' If Clint would have seen her, he would have known she wanted to take someone's eye out.

Sussler indicated to the groups now spread out near the north double gates of the compound. 'If you'll excuse me, Agent Romanoff, I need to pass down a few orders then we will go over the area we'd first like you to turn your attention to.'

He didn't wait for her to agree. He strode off into the distance, his softer demeanour back at the Tower completely gone, replaced with a dominant personality and a voice that rose above all the chatter, summoning a couple of lieutenants and sergeants to him.

She stood on the outer, not far from the barbed wire fence. A couple of men on guard duty glanced her way, but their guns were still trained into the distance, searching for an invisible enemy.

She could also make out the glint of guns higher up, snipers hidden in crows' nests around the place. She had seen them walking in yesterday.

In the distance, Sussler talked to the sergeant who was heading the group with shovels.

Bruce's words rang back to her about how bad happened away from good.

She looked back to the men on duty. One particular soldier, a young-looking private with freckles and red hair peeking out the bottom of his cap, had his eye on her, but quickly looked away. The other one, older and taller, watched her longer, not caring that she saw him checking her out.

He was confident. That wasn't much good to her.

The other one though. He would be eager for attention. Probably especially in front of the other man who she would guess dominated more, or at least, pretended he did, with women.

The younger one probably hadn't learnt to lie about midnight excursions yet.

Seeing Sussler was still occupied, she took her time walking over to the two guards, careful to make noise but not too much. Careful to sashay but not too extravagantly.

The perfect combination of enticing but not threatening.

The younger one knew she was coming by how he tried to stand taller. The older one let her know by winking.

Quelling down the usual urge to shudder, she smiled before leaning against the fence, the slightest bit too close to the younger one.

‘Come here often?’ she joked.

The younger one, with a tag which read Wendell, glanced at her in a kind of thrilled and horrified way while the other one’s tag was so smudged she couldn’t read it.

She didn’t have to worry though because he winked at her again and said, ‘More than you think,’ before putting out his hand, saying, ‘Corporal Lewis Clarke. Sometimes do guard duty, sometimes monitor the cameras of this place.’ He winked at her for the third time. ‘Like tonight. All alone.’

‘A man of many talents,’ Natasha purred, shaking his hand.

He preened under the attention. ‘So, what are you doing so far out here, little lady?’

It was simultaneously too easy and painfully grating but she kept on. ‘Just doing some things here and there for General Sussler.’

Lewis nodded back. ‘Good god, that man has been needing a secretary for a long time. He hardly knows when we are due for pay half the time.’ He winked for the fourth time, leading Natasha to infer that he had little experience with flirting other than old black and white movies. ‘He needs someone to sort him out.’

‘I don’t know about that,’ Natasha said, leaning towards Wendell, who watched her with something approaching worship as she said, ‘I think I might be the one who needs the sorting out.’

‘I’m on duty,’ Wendell spluttered then looked as though he didn’t know why he said it.

‘I’m not,’ she said and left it at that, walking off, knowing both men’s eyes were shamelessly on her.

A few strings of her web laid, she waited for Sussler to come back. The gates were opened and the group with the shovels started to walk out. One of the soldiers brushed too close to her.

‘Sorry, ma’am,’ he said with a smirk.

Natasha smiled, tracing her fingers along the soldier’s collar pretending to straighten it.

‘Don’t be,’ she murmured and he looked damn pleased with himself as he marched off, unaware of what she’d done.

Not long after, Sussler returned.

‘What happened this morning?’ she asked before he could start on a different tangent.

She usually wouldn’t have been so straightforward but Sussler was the one person who seemed to know her here. If she didn’t ask questions, he would probably find that suspicious in and of itself.

‘Assumed hostile forces had crossed one of our outer perimeters,’ Sussler said without hesitation which made her on guard. ‘They have been sorted but we can see more movement further North so scout groups have been sent out to make sure it isn’t part of Nhuungku and just civilians.’

She nodded. ‘Just another day in Alia Surat?’ she said with her coy half-smile that she hated.

He laughed. ‘Now you’re getting it.’ He jerked his head back to the main building. ‘I’ll set out the sectors we’ve searched and you can decide where would be the best place for you and your friend to start next.’

‘Sounds good.’

‘And just remember, Agent Romanoff. Our resources are your resources. If you need anything, just let me know.’ He looked out into the distance. ‘We need to hurry. Who knows how much time those children have left?’

Interlude 9

Desiree woke up to screams of pain. At first, she thought they were part of her dreams and followed her into waking.

She was wrong.

Running out of her room and along the underground tunnels she had long memorised, she found a woman on the ground of one of them, clinging to her elder, Maya. The oil lamps they had wedged into jagged edges poking out of the tunnel walls lit the area just enough for Desiree to see.

Blood dripped from the woman's dark hair and onto Maya's lap, staining her tattered clothes, even running down her legs to slip between the cracks in her toes.

Robin stood over them, gun in hand, but it was pointed at the roof as she stared in mute horror at the scene before her.

Desiree came forward and crouched down in front of the woman.

'Has Bella been called?' she asked, going to reach out to the crying woman but then thought better of it.

She wondered in the back of her mind what colour her eyes were because she couldn't see with how they were squinted shut in pain.

Robin didn't look at her as she answered, 'She's tending to the ones who have a chance of surviving.'

Maya looked mournfully to Desiree. 'They're from Ludrami. They were just ransacked. Or bombed. We don't know. Sounds like soldiers, looking for us.'

The implication was there. If they weren't out here, would the rampage have ever happened?

Desiree knew that answer though; she knew it personally. All the people here did. Maya was forgetting. Or hoping.

Sometimes, one was as bad as the other.

Desiree looked to Robin. 'No chance?'

Robin bowed her head.

Closing her eyes for a moment, Desiree blocked out the women's cries of pain, bringing herself back to memories where pain could be fixed with Band-Aids and kisses.

Then, she reached out for the woman. 'I've got this one, Maya.'

The woman screamed being shifted from one knee to the other. Her teeth were stained with the blood and some dribbled out of the corner of her mouth.

'There we are, my girl,' Desiree murmured, running her hands over the woman's hair. She couldn't have been much older than herself. Maybe twenty-five. Her next question was directed at Maya. 'What's her name?'

'We don't know.'

Desiree didn't let that deter her and decided the woman looked like an Allira.

'Beautiful Allira,' she said, keeping up her gentle stroke until she settled her hands on Allira's cheeks.

She felt like she couldn't do it without having a name for the woman and now she had it, there was nothing to hold her back.

Allira needed to be out of pain; she deserved to be.

'Come on, my girl,' Desiree smiled even though it felt impossible to do so, pressing her fingers firmer into Allira's cheeks. Not enough to hurt but enough to make an impression in the skin. 'Just... rest.'

Desiree didn't look away like she used to. Rather than seeing life drained away, she looked on it as peace coming over. She watched as Allira's body loosened and ignored the fear and anxiety building up within Desiree, refused to act on it, to let it settle into her bones.

Finally, Allira's eyes opened. She smiled a blood-stained smile up at Desiree, before her eyes became vacant and she died a peaceful death in Desiree's lap, looking at the dirt wall.

Desiree's hands dropped and she clenched and unclenched her hands, willing all of the ugly feelings to edge out of her. After all, they weren't her own so she shouldn't hold on to them.

It was something she had learnt the hard way.

'You okay?' Maya didn't touch her, knowing better, but was close, old wrinkled face watching her in kindly worry.

'Her eyes were green.'

'Pardon?'

Desiree looked at Maya. 'Allira's eyes were green.'

Maya nodded slowly. 'Yes. Yes... they were.'

That's when Desiree realized that Robin wasn't there.

‘Watch over her,’ Desiree commanded.

Maya cradled Allira protectively. Allira held her haunting, vacant smile. Was her spirit smiling down on them or screaming over her trauma?

Desiree could only hope that her now painless death had made the transition easier.

The sensations Allira had felt... what usually all of them felt... still rang within Desiree. Fear mostly, throbbing in her forearms and making her heartbeat beat to the rhythm.

She didn’t know if her worries were her own or what she had taken off Allira as she died. She was thankful she didn’t take on the physical pain as well.

But all she could do was follow her instincts now and let her feet take her to the holding cells.

When she saw Robin over Deborah, gun held to the back of her head, Desiree didn’t hesitate. She jumped in between.

Robin kept her weapon up. ‘Step aside.’

Desiree didn’t blink. ‘Stand down or shoot. Those are your two choices.’

‘You always think of things as black and white.’

Desiree didn’t get to think on what she meant before Robin kicked her leg in and shoved her to the side. She hit the bars and the ringing in her head deafened her. She knew she was calling out, ‘Don’t do it, don’t do it,’ but she couldn’t hear it with her own ears.

She hoped the ringing wasn’t the aftermath of hearing a gunshot. But then she saw that Deborah was still crouched on the floor, hands folded behind her head, shaking, and staring at Desiree, silently begging for help.

Robin still hadn’t pulled the trigger. Her finger rested there though, ready, steady...

The only giveaway she was hesitating was she hadn’t fired instantly.

‘Robin,’ Desiree gasped, feeling breathless and light-headed. ‘Leave her. She didn’t do the raid.’

‘What raids has she done though?’ For once, Robin wasn’t in absolute control, voice biting and loud in the tensely quiet atmosphere. ‘What other daughters and sons has she cut down before coming here? Before we stopped her?’

Still though, Robin didn’t pull the trigger.

Deborah looked to Desiree.

Her eyes were green too.

Desiree found herself in front of Deborah, folding her body over the other woman's until she didn't know where she began and the other ended. She stared into Robin's barrel.

'Leave her,' was all she said.

She didn't have to say anything though. Because, she knew Robin wasn't going to fire when a fine tremor went through her body.

With a ragged scream, Robin threw the gun on the ground and pounded her fist into the dirt.

'What did we do to deserve this?' She screamed, slamming her fist into her chest. 'What did we do? What did our mothers do? What did our *children* do?' She pointed a deadly finger at the only white woman in the room. 'I know what she's done to deserve a bullet in her head. Yet, I can't *give* it to her.'

'She doesn't deserve it.' Desiree buried her face into Deborah's almost unrecognizable blonde hair. 'She doesn't, she doesn't.'

But, the truth of the matter was, Desiree didn't know.

All she did know was, when Deborah burrowed into her, whispering, 'Thank you,' in her ear in that growingly familiar accent, Desiree couldn't let this woman die.

Even if she was part of the people who were destroying what little world she had left.

Chapter 12

The grey walls of the base were familiar but that brought Natasha no comfort. She kept walking, dodging the gazes of all the soldiers. None recognized her as the Black Widow but she could feel their eyes linger on her, tracing her lines.

She felt like letting loose on them with her Widow Bites but she had to play nice.

She always had to play damn nice.

The red dust greeted her outside.

It was too much.

It was only in the thick of the red dust storm she allowed a burst of emotion.

‘*Bozhe moi!*’ she spat, slamming her fists down on her thighs.

She wanted to scream; she really did.

When she had come with Clint to S.H.I.E.L.D and he’d introduced her to Coulson and Fury... both who looked like they wanted to kill her rather than greet her... crazily enough, it had all felt right. Like she was coming to a place she was meant to be.

A place where she could do real good and erase that red. She would never get rid of the stain but at least it wouldn’t suffocate her.

It wasn’t time which had revealed she was wrong. It had all come crashing down in one swift moment, making the mist sweep in and blind her. Steve was the only thing which stopped everything being taken from her.

Here though? This was different. It was different in a way she couldn’t pin yet.

She didn’t like not knowing things. It never ended well for her.

The red dust kept on getting into her throat, nose, eyes until she wrenched at her hair in frustration, hissing, ‘*Bozhe moi,*’ one more time.

But that didn’t make her feel any better. The particles of dust still whipped into her.

Still though, she made her decision.

Bruce was sitting in the lotus position outside of her quarters’ door like it was the middle of a damn meadow rather than another rising dust storm. He looked a little worse for wear but overall, had the whole ruffled look Bruce never lost.

‘Doc’,’ she said, opening her door and waving him in.

He followed at a slower pace.

When she tried to hand a Glock over to him, he looked more rattled than when she had pulled a gun on him.

‘I’ll pass,’ he said.

‘Then suit up whichever way you need to,’ she said, snatching up her favourite knife. ‘Because we’re going on a little expedition.’

‘We?’

‘More me, but I need you to go along with it for now.’

‘Okay?’

He still didn’t move. He was twitchier than usual and she realized he was holding the rock she had shoved at him before he grabbed his mug. It was tossed from hand to hand, back and forth, to and fro until it was a hypnotising, grey blur.

She grabbed her water bottle, communicator, attached her ear piece, slipped one more knife in the side of her right boot for good measure before straightening up. ‘Ready?’

When he stared at her blankly, she shoved another water bottle into his hand before jerking her head. ‘Come on. It’s not like you’ll be going far anyway.’

Bruce followed behind her, something she wouldn’t have allowed before. But she could feel his grey light clouding him and reaching out to her, as though testing, seeing what was about happen, waiting nervously for rejection.

Strangely, this was what she had been looking for, for Bruce to let her be the one in control. Now, she didn’t like it. She didn’t like the way Bruce was so thrown off course since landing that he wasn’t pushing back.

She could feel how he wound even tighter with soldiers around. Without thinking, she slowed down, letting him walk beside her.

‘What happened here this morning?’ he whispered to her.

‘Breach of the perimeter by hostile forces.’

‘And?’

‘And it’s being sorted while we start our search for the Nhuungku terrorist group. Here,’ she slammed the folder Sussler gave her into his chest, ‘educate yourself while I book out our truck.’

‘I have seven PhDs, I’ve had enough of educating myself,’ Bruce grumbled but he perused the files.

She flashed her papers to the sergeant standing at attention in front of the vehicle hangar.

He looked her up and down a couple of times more than necessary before double-checking Sussler's signature. Then, he glanced at Bruce and paled in recognition. After that, he checked out the all-terrain truck in no time.

Natasha checked it over, noting the motorcycle in the back. She was surprised to find two but wasn't about to correct the sergeant on it.

'I need electrical repair equipment as well,' she said. 'Just in case something goes wrong.'

The sergeant quickly packed a couple of tool boxes in the back.

'Best time to go out,' he said. 'Storm's meant to be dying down.'

She didn't know whether he was lying about that or not. Chances were he was hoping Bruce would get lost in the wilderness forever.

Bruce was one problem the army could never get rid of. Even when he had disappeared, he was still there, in their collective consciousness.

Natasha knew. She had seen all the files go across Coulson's desk and even Fury's, wanting help in accessing this beast which could be used for the ultimate of weapons.

It was surprising Fury never did jump on it, all things considered. But then again, Fury always did have an eye for the bigger picture.

'Hop in, Doc,' she said, throwing open the passenger doorway from where she sat in the driver's seat.

Bruce glanced up from the files. For once, the distrust was blatant on his face.

In the end though, they both knew there wasn't much she could actually do to him. But it went deeper than that with Bruce and Natasha respected him for that. The priority wasn't himself.

His fear wasn't for him; it was what he could do to those around him.

Still though, he hopped in. She couldn't decide if he had decided to just trust her or decided if she wound up dead, he wouldn't be all that broken up about it.

To get out was easy with Sussler's papers and if it was any other circumstances, Natasha may have felt proud of what she was doing. An agent out to save children, out to do better than she had before, to hopefully make the pounding of blood in her ears that bit less profound.

This wasn't one of those times though. In fact, the red dust had mixed with her mist, making it hard to tune into any of her senses other than sight.

Still though, she kept on driving, not caring for the bumps and holes in the rough terrain. Bruce braced his hands against the dashboard but other than that, didn't say a word.

When she was out of sight of the compound, she still didn't slow. In her rear-view mirror, she could see the barbed wire grow smaller until it disappeared in the red cloud. It was clearer today though, so she could see the strong demarcation between land and the blue sky above. To the west, she swore she could see some low-rising mountains which she found a comfort when everything else was so damn flat.

She considered driving that way for a moment, even if it wasn't the direction she needed to go. Then, she spied this group of strange, orange-red high rocks pushing out of the ground, like a giant's fingers. Not perfect but it would do so she pulled over.

'Are those... ant-hills?' Bruce asked, curiosity seeping into his voice despite himself.

'All I know is, they provide shade,' Natasha remarked before getting out a motorbike, placing it in the shade, along with another gallon of water from the back of the truck. 'You know how to ride one of these, yeah?'

Bruce edged out of the truck, coming to stand next to her in the shade of one of the gigantic ant-hills that stood out like a weird beacon in the dust.

Or omen. Natasha preferred to think of it as a beacon.

He walked around the motorbike before shrugging, as though he didn't care. 'Your point?'

'My *point* is that if you needed to get back to the compound, you could.' Natasha strode back to the truck and went through one of the bags in the canvas tray.

Good. There was a sniper rifle. She could never be too careful.

'Here,' she pulled out the army communicator Sussler had issued her in case she needed to link to him directly and quickly. However, his line was all she would pick up. While it increased her trust of him that she would be able to hear all his orders, it limited her too much. 'Can you fix this?'

Bruce edged closer, keeping his usual distance from her. 'It doesn't look broken,' he pointed out dryly.

She didn't humour him and pushed on. 'I need it to link into the other communicator wavelengths around here.'

He raised an eyebrow. 'To spy on them?'

'Exactly.'

A glimpse of a smile crossed his face and he hesitantly took the communicator from her outstretched hand, trying his best not to touch her.

He didn't succeed and she got to feel his fingers against hers, if for the briefest of moments. Though his skin was soft like she felt before, there were some hard edges to it. Like the tips of his fingers, where it looked like chips of skin were taken out of them, making them rippled along the edges.

From her knowledge of how he worked as the Hulk, no permanent damage seemed to stick with him. So this must have been something which happened before the Hulk ever did.

He saw where her eyes were and the way he tried to pull his sleeves over his fingers caused something to spike in her. An emotion she wasn't familiar with.

Self-consciously clearing his throat, he turned the smooth metallic item in his grasp. 'I don't know if I can do that. That's kind of Tony's department.'

'You've worked with him for a while now.'

Another smile, this one softer again with a hint of sadness. 'I have.'

'Then give it a shot.'

'I might break it.'

'I've got another one.' It was meant to have been Bruce's but they would have to make do.

Sighing, Bruce rummaged through the tool boxes.

'Power's in the back,' Natasha said, jumping out of the tray to give him some room.

He grunted in response, already knee-deep in the mechanics of it all.

She stepped away and grabbed her tracker.

With a couple of quick clicks, she had her target. It was moving fast, due north, trailing slightly left. Grabbing the brief, she traced the map Sussler had given her, marking off the areas they had searched. Following a trail that seemed to be where the vehicle was heading, she saw a small print, proclaiming a village called Ludrami.

‘Done.’ Bruce’s voice disappeared into the wind, but she managed to hear him.

‘I can hear anyone?’ she asked, coming around the back.

Bruce had left the communicator on the tray so he didn’t have to hand it to her.

‘I think it would depend on proximity but I can pick up some lines back at the compound like the patrol about to head out.’

Natasha nodded. ‘Nice. Headed this way?’

‘Patrolling to the west.’

‘Perfect.’ She grabbed the army communicator and held it to her ear, pleased when she was able to scan for lines. The only two she could pick up was the patrol and another group that seemed to be in charge of regrouping after a fly-over.

She hoped he was right with the proximity thing but she didn’t think he could do any better.

Jumping back up onto the back of the truck, she was vaguely aware he was talking to her but didn’t tune in, packing away the equipment, before examining the sniper rifle one more time.

‘Ms. Romanoff.’

The name finally pulled Natasha out of her methodical state and she took in Bruce properly.

Sweat streaked down his tanned forehead, leaving gaps in the dust that he was covered in. He looked more tired than usual and he was still dressed in the clothes he had slept in. He had a jacket on, not because it was cold... oh, no, it was more like hell out here... but because the piercing heat of the sun would burn holes in exposed skin. It was perfect for the solar on the truck.

The lines around his eyes and forehead were more pronounced. His irises seemed more brown than usual but perhaps that was because she was studying them more deeply.

For the first time, she questioned what a transformation took out of him.

‘You okay?’ The words popped out, uncalculated and just there.

He obviously didn’t take it that way though and shook his head and backed away, as though he could erase how much he had shown her.

‘Ms. Romanoff,’ he repeated, pressing his fingers to the bridge of his nose as though trying to stem off a headache. ‘It’s been a long day and believe it or not, I

consider myself a patient person. But, if I don't get a straight answer about what is happening and what we are doing, I might lose what little colour in my hair that I have left.'

It was probably the most words she'd heard Bruce string together at one time. She also wasn't sure, with his perfect blend of sarcasm, drollness and bitterness, how much of what he said was in play or not.

She decided not to find out.

'Okay.' Natasha went to a knee, but stayed on the truck, causing her to tower over Bruce. 'Sussler thinks that you are out here to help me search.'

Neither she nor he acknowledged that they both didn't know what the hell he was out in Alia Surat for altogether, other than through stubbornness and spite.

He shifted uncomfortably and she carried on without missing a beat.

'To search for the Nhuungku terrorist group, he said he would give us anything so I had to keep that ruse.'

'We aren't searching for them?' Bruce asked, frowning down at the folder she had given him.

'No.' Natasha slung the sniper rifle over her shoulder. 'I'm investigating.'

'Intense investigation,' he said, eyeing the rifle.

'Something was up this morning.' She leapt down from the back of the truck and proceeded to close it up. 'I'm going to find out what.'

'And my role in this is?'

'Keep up the ruse. I'm leaving the motorbike with you in case you need to get back to the compound.'

Bruce grabbed the driver's door before she could slam it shut behind her.

'What's up?' he said, all tiredness gone, replaced with an intensity she hadn't seen from Bruce.

This wasn't quite anger but it was close enough for her to be on high alert.

'A group of soldiers went out with shovels.' She didn't mince words because by now, she had learnt that Bruce knew when she was playing with him.

He didn't like it. Neither did his counterpart.

Rather than getting more aggressive or even gloating, to say his instincts at the very beginning were proving to be right, he just... let her be.

Slamming the door shut for her, he pointed to his own ear piece. 'Call me if you need me.'

Then, he turned and retreated to the slim shadows cast by the anthills.

He didn't complain though. He resumed his lotus position as sweat poured down his face and stained his clothes.

She started the truck and pulled away in a cloud of dust.

When it cleared, he still hadn't moved. Even though she was far away, she could have sworn that his eyes were open and they were watching her.

For once, she didn't find that unnerving.

Interlude 10

‘You sure this is a good idea?’ Sonya asked, crouched at the doorway.

Desiree hardly saw her standing straight of late. Maybe it was weakness; maybe it was weighed down by the sadness.

Whichever way, Desiree refused to have so much as a slouch.

She cocked her gun with a firm, ‘Yes.’

‘There could still be soldiers there.’

‘They’re like fire. Once they have gone through, they don’t go back.’

‘Why don’t you wait for just another day?’

‘Every minute I waste, there’s less chance of finding any survivors.’

Sonya didn’t argue that though she did finally sit on the dirt with tired resignation.

‘I’m coming.’

Desiree turned to see Robin now in the room, ever present gun still in her hand.

No apologies had been given on either side and Robin met Desiree’s gaze unabashedly. Her hair was tied in her designated tight bun and her face was back to giving nothing away.

Desiree pulled her pack over her shoulder, checked her gun one more time before marching past Robin. ‘Just try not to kick me in the legs again.’

‘If you remember what side you’re on,’ Robin responded in kind, and other than that, they didn’t say a word to each other.

They walked the tunnels until they came to the maze of ladders and ropes that would lead them to the hole above that they had covered with a makeshift door of branches and clay dirt.

Robin began to climb while Desiree had a few stops to make.

The first was to the shuffled-together infirmary, which was the closest cave to the entrance. It was huge, spread out with makeshift cots that they had taken from bombed villages, nests of blankets from convoy hits and the little medicine they could scramble together from the villages and the convoys put together. It was the best lit place in the whole underground maze of tunnels. Oil lanterns, flashlights and anything

else that shone was shoved in there to better help see injuries, perform stitches or administer needles when they were lucky enough to have some with painkillers.

Bella was run off her feet from trying to make sure the survivors of the fly-over on Ludmira actually survived. All fifteen cots were filled, some with more than one person.

Little Daniel ran alongside Bella, having an eerily good stomach for all things doctoring and the steadiest hands Desiree had ever seen, child or adult alike.

Maya was there as well. While her hands shook too much to help, she was more of a comfort to the patients, keeping them calm as some received stitches without painkillers or willing them to sleep, despite the pain.

Desiree couldn't go in, hovering at the cave entrance. If any of the current survivors touched her, she would feel it all, feel it in her bones, their fear, their confusion, their pain.

She couldn't take that. Not so soon after Allira.

So, all she could do was stand there, trying not to look at the sickly faces under the pale light because she didn't want another one to haunt her if she came back and it was no longer there.

Finally, she went to the holdings, which was far further and deeper than any other cave in their temporary home.

Deborah stood up as soon as she came in and held out a hand through the bars.

Desiree didn't hesitate, coming over and holding onto Deborah as tight as she could. Desiree leaned her head against the bars.

They felt cool to her touch and sent shivers down her spine. She wished she could feel the river, finding the cold pockets deep within on those sunny days when you couldn't get a reprieve.

This was a Band-Aid. Everything was.

'You have blood on your clothes,' Deborah whispered.

'It's been a long morning.'

'If you wanted to talk about it, I'm not planning on going anywhere.'

'I am.' At Deborah's worried frown, she hurried to clarify, 'Sonya is going to watch over you. Believe me, she'll never hurt you.'

'That's not...' Deborah swallowed, looking like she was *seeing* Desiree.

‘That’s not what I’m worried about,’ Deborah managed, gripping onto Desiree’s hand, the white more of a contrast against her dark skin with the colours wrapped around each other.

Desiree felt overwhelmed with emotions that were for once different from outright grief. Still though, she pushed through. She always did.

‘Thank you,’ she whispered. She hadn’t meant words like that in a while. ‘But I’ll be fine. I have to go.’

‘Why?’

Desiree simply shook her head.

Deborah bit her lip but nodded in acceptance anyway. ‘Are you hurt?’ she asked, indicating to the blood on Desiree’s clothes again.

‘We have wounded.’ Desiree met the other woman’s eyes. Her prisoner. Her aggressor. Her friend. ‘Not all of them survived.’

She was surprised by the almost frantic quality in the other woman’s face.

‘Desiree,’ she said, ‘Desiree, I can... I can *help*. I was training as a medic before... before.’

The realization of what Deborah was saying struck a chord with Desiree. Since coming in to this prisoner every day, Desiree began to feel unsure what she was even doing here, what she was playing with.

However, Deborah looked determined and Desiree was taken with the green of her eyes.

‘Desiree,’ she said, and the way she said the name was so painfully familiar that it hurt again, ‘Desiree, let me do this. I owe it.’

‘You don’t owe me.’

‘No.’ She shook her head before the same brokenness came over her that Desiree saw everywhere. ‘Not for that.’

Desiree studied everything about her, just as she did the day they had taken her. When her and her male counterpart had happened to get too close to their hideout and where she and Robin had been searching for food.

She had looked like a scared woman that day. She didn’t seem too young to be out in this life; Desiree had felt she should be old enough, be *smart* enough, to know better than to continue the abuse and fight that she was. Didn’t she know the lives she was ruining? Didn’t she care?

Didn't she care that her people were *oppressing* Desiree and her people, making it a *them* and *us* where they scrabbled around in the dirt while Deborah and her people strove to take more and more and more? Didn't she *know*?

Looking at her now, Desiree finally felt that she did know.

Without saying a word, Desiree took out the key and opened the chains wrapped around the makeshift cell door.

Deborah stared at her before edging out of her confined space. Then, she came to stand behind Desiree.

Waiting for her to lead the way.

Desiree turned her back, on her enemy, and walked out of the holding area with Deborah in tow.

'What the hell?' she could hear Sonya say from somewhere close by. 'Are you mad? Where are you going with her?'

Desiree didn't look back as she said, 'Infirmary.'

She knew Deborah was nervous. She could feel her pressing as close as possible.

Sonya began following.

Still though, Desiree didn't slow her pace. When she came to the infirmary, she walked right in to where Bella was creating a splint for a little boy's arm which was obviously broken. He had already passed out from the pain of it.

'Bella.' Desiree pointed to said woman then behind her. 'Deborah. She was training to be a medic.'

Bella didn't blink an eye. 'Well, what're you waiting for? Brace him then. Can't have him waking up, screaming and moving. It'll start everything all over again.'

Deborah looked once at Desiree, waiting for some sort of permission. When it wasn't given, she moved in anyway. Hesitating only briefly, she brushed a hand over the boy's forehead, whispering, 'Sorry,' before she moved into position.

As soon as she heard the boy start to whimper in his half-unconscious state, Desiree had to back away. It was like his pain was reaching out to her, weak fingers grasping for her to take him in her arms and let him go with that damn smile on his face.

She went out in the tunnel hallway, leaning on her knees, breathing deeply.

‘Are you insane?’ Sonya hissed, crouched across from her. She looked like she wanted to be angry but was too tired.

‘I know what I’m doing,’ Desiree managed to say and she really hoped that was the case.

Sonya snorted but didn’t argue. Instead, she marched back into the infirmary, probably to keep a close eye on Deborah. Desiree wasn’t going to tell her not to.

Feeling eyes on her, she caught Daniel’s large, brown ones staring at her from around the corner.

‘You can take a breather, bub. Change your clothes. Get away from the blood.’

Daniel edged closer. For thirteen years old, he looked so much younger, his lanky body not even coming up to her shoulder and she wasn’t a tall woman in herself.

‘I saw Allira come in,’ he said and his voice shook.

‘Oh, bub,’ Desiree breathed.

While Daniel had seen a lot, Allira’s condition had been something else.

He shook his head, brushing aside her sympathy. ‘You made her... you made it peaceful.’ In a shock move, he leaned over and kissed her cheek. ‘Thank you for doing that.’

He took off before she even knew how to respond. She sat, curled against the wall, feeling like if she stayed there, unmoving, the world would stop as well. Then, they could all have a break from the blood, if only for a minute.

But, the longer she sat here, things would only get worse. So, she found the strength that they all drew from and made her way out.

‘Good luck,’ Maya’s voice followed her from somewhere and it seemed to hold the knowledge of something else.

Though, the elders often sounded like that to Desiree when they spoke. She raised her hand in acknowledgement and kept on keeping on.

‘What took you so long?’ Robin said when she emerged from their underground hideout.

The air was purifying and Desiree took a deep breath. ‘Helping out in the infirmary.’

The lie didn’t sit comfortably on her lips but she knew better than to say what she’d done when Robin was so raw from gathering the survivors early this morning.

Robin nodded before cocking her gun. 'Shall we?'

Swallowing the lump in her throat, Desiree pulled her own rifle off her shoulder, prepping it in her hands.

Then, as one, they headed off in the direction of the ransacked community. Desiree swore she could smell smoke and the acrid scent left behind of charred metal. But she couldn't see any evidence yet. No trails of blood gave a way where the survivors had come, already long sunk into the red earth, becoming part of it. The sun was hot on Desiree's head but soon started to become obscured by the rising dust.

After a good hour of silent walking, Robin, without breaking her stride or looking over, said, 'Sorry.'

'Pardon?'

She jerked her head to Desiree's legs. 'You're limping more than usual. I'm sorry.'

'Me too.'

'For what?' Robin did look at her now, strong face as impenetrable as always.

'Neglecting you.'

Robin snorted. 'I'm not a puppy.'

'No. We're family.'

Robin walked faster, her tell of not being comfortable with Desiree's statement. Probably because out of all of them, Desiree had the suspicions that Robin still believed her family, or at least, her little sister, was alive out there somewhere. This was despite the smoking remains they had found of her village when they returned after forming their resistance group. The person left standing from Robin's family, other than herself, was Daniel. Robin's son.

'Well.' Desiree pushed past the lump in her throat again. 'You're my family.'

A flicker of a smile came across Robin's lips. 'Don't go getting sentimental on me, Des, otherwise I might have to kick you 'gain.'

'I'm not scared.'

'Should be. Should be of a lot of things.' Robin looked pointedly at her before her gaze turned contemplating. 'Yet, you're not.'

'Maybe if you got to know the other things—'

'Tell that to the other side.'

'Believe me. I am.'

Robin pursed her lips but actually nodded. ‘You’ve always been the same, you know that?’

They never talked about the past. Ever. It wasn’t forbidden but it caused a level of hurt that it would feel wrong to bring up. But Desiree was finding it hurt her even more to keep it buried. That was why her talks with Deborah were so freeing. She could talk about her mum without restraint, remembering the things which made her smile, not cry.

Her heart rising with hope, Desiree couldn’t resist nudging Robin playfully, hoping this would bring forth some nostalgia with the one person who *knew* what her childhood was like. Because Robin had been there for a lot of years when she was a kid. Before Desiree was removed.

‘A forward thinker?’ Desiree teased.

‘A naïve idiot.’

‘Rude.’ Desiree lost the spring in her gimp step at the harsh words.

That was, until Robin gently nudged her back.

‘We’re going to figure something out, Rob.’ Desiree put an arm around her shoulder. ‘I know we will.’

‘Naïve idiot,’ was all Robin said and strode ahead. It didn’t stop the biggest smile from forming on her face that Desiree had seen for a long, long time.

It wasn’t quite what Desiree had been hoping to achieve with their conversation. It was better.

Robin was happy, if only for a moment. This was the time that really deserved to be frozen because Robin deserved happiness more than anything in the world.

It didn’t last though; it never did.

Robin shattered it when she called out, ‘I see smoke up ahead, Des. Covert mode.’

Taking a deep breath, trying to prepare herself for what they might find, for what Desiree might have to do, the feelings she might have to take on, Desiree crouched to the ground, covering her head with her red cloak.

‘Shall we?’ Robin asked.

This time, Desiree answered:

‘We shall.’

Chapter 13

The heat was as oppressive as ever while Natasha drove towards the pinpoint on her GPS. Frankly, the section didn't look any different from the expanse of red she had been driving over for the past forty-five minutes but she kept going. The sky was darker than it was earlier and she dreaded to think another dust storm might be blowing up. Please, no.

Insects slammed into her windshield at an alarming rate. Several flies, larger than she thought possible, had found their way in and were intent on landing on her forehead, lip, anywhere that was the most annoying.

She didn't have the window down because as with most army vehicles, it had some protection against bullets. Not bullet proof as most advertised. Natasha had found that out when in the Red Room, exposing the weak points of a vehicle which would allow her bullet to find its mark.

Because of her knowledge, she'd chosen to sit in a rather odd position, half spread over the front seat, forehead as low as possible to not provide the perfect target for an entry point in the upper right hand corner of where the windscreen and steel intersected.

Had they improved that by now? Probably. She had put it in her reports of how to upgrade army vehicles when Clint first brought her into S.H.I.E.L.D.

But old habits died hard.

The air conditioning in the truck was on but sweat still soaked Natasha's hair and the red suit she had on to better blend with the environment. It felt weird to wear the colour, embracing everything around her and worse, within her. Her training said that red was a target but in this one, rare circumstance, it wasn't.

She wasn't happy about that fact but as always, strategy won out for her.

Soon, an army truck came into view, stark camo against the blue and red horizon, but no soldiers. Her tracker indicated her destination was still a good five miles away.

Still though, she pulled up as well, cautiously scanning her surroundings with her sniper rifle from the inside of her vehicle.

It didn't take long for her to spy the soldiers in the far off distance, walking towards what looked to be a crude version of a village, probably not more than a couple of square acres. Grey and black smoke billowed from piles of warped corrugated iron and splintered wood. Some iron and wood were still intact, forming some kind of lean-to houses or at the very least, protection from the harsh environment of sun and dirt. Flames flickered in between the colours of smoke like a mirage, now and then blending with the growing dust in the air.

She could smell burning meat before anything else. Two trees with bloated middles sat on either side of the scene, like forming a gateway.

Smoke rose over the scene and she could see bodies strewn along the ground. Little black dots danced in her vision. She wasn't sure if it was flies swarming what were left of the people or the way her knees felt weak.

No one was firing and the soldiers walked easy, shovels slung over their shoulders like council workers going to fix a busted pipe.

There was something so dissonant about the scene that it made Natasha's skin crawl.

Getting out, she cautiously checked all of the vehicles. There were some lopsided crosses in the back of one of the trucks.

Turning, she set her sights on the village in the distance. Wrapping a red scarf around her face, she began to walk. The smell of burning meat grew stronger.

Bruce wasn't a spy; he was very well aware of that.

He also wasn't an awesome person to have in a firefight. While he would win, his teammates would most likely get crushed in the process as well.

Yeah. He was more of a solo artist.

That had been hurtful in high-school. In his adult life, he was... well, not *happy*, ambling along on his own but ambled along he did, doing the best he could but most importantly, not doing his worst.

Today, that wasn't good enough. He felt more than a little frustrated at how he couldn't control his counterpart. In New York, it was different; there were people present who could take him down or at the very least, leave him behind. Any damage

he did was going to, at a time when the world was ending, do actually more good than harm.

A one-off situation.

Now though, he couldn't go with Natasha because the likelihood that he would kill her along with anyone who could possibly threaten her was too high.

She didn't trust him and more than that, he didn't trust himself.

That should have been that and he would wait in what little shade he had until Natasha returned.

However, he could hear what Tony would be nattering in his ear if he was.

Bruce always knew he would start hearing voices in his head; he just hadn't predicted it would sound so much like his caffeine-addicted friend.

Better than his own usual thoughts he guessed which weren't the most hopeful. Problem was that this voice wasn't the most reasonable either.

'Yeah, I know the Other Guy saved you,' he muttered to himself, running his fingers over his knuckles, pulling at his hair. When that didn't calm him, he gripped the monstrous structure that made up the anthill. 'It was one-off though. One-off.'

And, while it wasn't something he ever talked about, he got flashes of sensations from the Other Guy. Memories through feelings.

The Other Guy liked Tony. Bruce liked Tony. It was natural he was a little more cooperative when Tony was falling.

Bruce had also gotten flashes of how his counterpart felt about Natasha.

Not the biggest fan.

The feeling was mutual.

Both the Other Guy and Natasha had been happy to kill the other at one point so he supposed that was only fair.

However though, today? It had been a different story.

Bruce had reacted to her; so did the Other Guy, however small and however briefly.

The nattering started in his head again.

It was even more frustrating than usual because Tony wasn't there for Bruce to tell him to shut up.

Not that it ever made any difference.

'If you're wrong about this, you'll be sorry,' he growled, grabbing the motorbike and straddling it.

He could hear Tony's voice as distinctly in his head than if he was standing there.

'I'm never wrong. Genius, remember?'

'Yeah, yeah,' he muttered, before punching in a number on his communicator and impatiently waiting for it to answer. When it did, he didn't waste any time in greeting and said, 'I need a favour.'

The dust was kicking up again. Because of course it was.

As the storm blew up, she couldn't even make out anything through her scope. The only thing guiding her was her tracker.

Here, in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by red on all sides, she felt as alone as she did in Gimmelwald. However, this time, she knew she was at a precipice and her beam was either about to turn one way into the mist or drastically another.

A soft vibration in her ear notified her to someone calling.

She wished more than anything it was Clint. But it wasn't Clint's number flashing up on the hand-held counterpart of the earpiece. And besides that fact, Clint usually sent a code before he rang through. Something he more did for tradition than logic.

She should have known. When did she get what she wished for?

Her thoughts were eerily similar to what someone else had said to her a long time ago.

She answered the phone before she could have another thought.

'Hello?'

'Why, I'm offended you haven't memorised my number by now.'

'Tony,' she breathed and was more comforted than she thought she would be at the sound of his voice.

'If you would have memorised my number or even saved it, you would have already known that. Then, you wouldn't have had to go through the discovery of it and we would be much further into this conversation.'

Natasha's lips twitched despite herself. *'I'm the reason we aren't further into this conversation?'*

‘Yes.’ It was probably the shortest, most straight-forward answer she had ever gotten from Tony.

‘What’s the word, Stark?’

‘My word of the day changes. Usually depends on what Dictionary.net sends me. My one today is avuncular. Avuncular. Say it. Feels delicious.’

‘Pass.’ Her feet felt steadier and miraculously the storm had dropped, if the slightest. Visibility was still compromised but she could make out more than five feet in front of her. ‘Is there a purpose to this conversation or is this a social call? Because let me tell you, Stark, not the best of times.’

Despite the truth to her words, she couldn’t help but be grateful for the company, no matter how many miles away.

She was getting soft.

‘Everything I do has a purpose.’

‘Enlighten me then.’

‘Hold on.’

There was whispering in the background which was muffled and Natasha strained her ears to catch a sound of Clint’s voice. She was too proud to outright ask to talk to him.

Then, Tony’s voice came back, oblivious and blasé but she was starting to pick when he was genuine or putting it on.

‘Huh. You know what? Never mind.’

‘Never mind what?’

‘Exactly,’ was all he said before clicking off.

If Tony hadn’t been close to being on her hit list before, he was a hell of a lot closer now. She didn’t think she had ever been in a conversation as singly maddening as that one.

Rather than feeling more rattled though, her centre was back and a calculated persona flowed over her. The one where she locked any emotion which could interfere with her mission into a tiny box in her mind. It wasn’t able to be accessed until long after the mission was over and she was by herself. Then, she could let it out and die that bit more, a new stream of blood joining the others, curving and dancing together like ribbons in her vision as she tried to sleep.

She kept pressing forward and pulled out her army communicator, pressing for it to scan for nearby frequencies to pick up.

If she was one to believe in luck, she would have crossed her fingers.

After a few long seconds of scrambling as she held it up to her ear, a voice finally crackled through.

‘We... caution.’

‘... hostile... dead... it’s a damn mess.’

‘You think we... this?’

Linking her earpiece to the army communicator so the sounds would go through it, she continued to walk.

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero: Most Recent Posts

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – what do you think makes a hero?

#showerquestions

Beck24 – its too early in my life to have an existential sweetie

BigBrotherLied – going by the heroes we have, im guessing looks lol

she says as she scours the internet looking for a shirtless pic of thor

smiles innocently

IamIronMan – youre a nutcase you know that right? we love you all the same though

Becky24 – seriously though heavy shower questions sweetie

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – im an odd little duck ͡°(ˊˋ)͡°

SandersBriggs – okay ill bite what does make a hero???

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – its not a knock knock joke

SandersBriggs – Lol alright alright um im going to go with bravery

Becky24 – thats a good one. lets run with that please and not make me all depressed

My-dog-ate-my-car-keys – whats to be depressed about? its like asking if you had a superpower what would it be. fun!!! im going with looks too :D :D :D

SandersBriggs – All seriousness aside its using what god provides you for the good of man

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – who decides whats right though???

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – and dont say god i havent exactly got him on speed dial. so who *on earth* decides whats right?

Becky24 – this here is the reason why people under 21 should be allowed to drink

BigBrotheLied - *raises hand* i can think of many others as well

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – can anyone at all take my question seriously or is this just all we do???

Becky24 – damn zoes whats up with you tonight

IAmIronMan – you been watchin the news again??? told you hon you cant handle it. just let it go and have some fun with us alright??? come on, take a fun spin on the question

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – sorry guys. a bit intense. um, im going to go with hair

My-dog-ate-my-car-keys – thor wins hands down then doesnt he? #godofhair

Becky24 – you sure you okay sweetie???

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – im okay thanks becks.

Becky24 – what did you even read???

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero – nothing really. just an early existential crisis of my own lol

SandersBriggs – im not saying what might help but i think yall might have a clue where im going with this

Zoe_Morgan_Is_A_Superhero has blocked

SandersBriggs

Interlude 11

‘Where’s your gun?’

Deborah’s eyes snapped open.

She sat on the dirt floor of the cave her capturers referred to as the infirmary. Her back was wedged in the corner, leaning against the cave wall of rock and hard dirt. She was far enough away from the cots so she couldn’t see the faces of the patients though she could smell the blood. She didn’t think she’d ever stop being able to.

She hadn’t been sitting there for long. She had needed a breath for a minute. Just one minute where she wasn’t seeing people screaming in pain because they didn’t have any anaesthetic to help with any of the numerous stitchings of skin and settings of bones.

A boy who asked the question stood near her. She recognised him instantly as one of the children on the missing profiles from that village, Sierra. Unfortunately, it wasn’t his features which she found distinguishable. His flatter nose and deep-set eyes were similar to the other children she had viewed.

No, it was the old scar running from his eyebrow to the middle of his cheek which made her remember him. Her heart went out to him instantly but she couldn’t understand how he was running around here free. Perhaps Stockholm Syndrome had finally kicked in with him?

He kept his distance from her. The intent stare on his face made her remember he had asked her a question.

‘I don’t have a gun,’ she said unsurely.

‘But you’ve had one,’ the boy said, no hint of question in his voice.

Slowly, she nodded. ‘Yes. Yes, I did.’

‘So where is it?’

She shifted uncomfortably. ‘It was taken from me.’

The boy didn’t relent. ‘You mean Robin took it from you. Or Desiree.’

Deborah only knew the other woman’s name because that was what Desiree called the person who tried to shoot her.

The thing which kept running through her mind was that the woman could have. She had a clear shot, but she hadn't taken it, this Robin.

She hadn't gone for the kill, like any decent terrorist would have. Meanwhile, Desiree was obviously going without food to keep her alive.

'I don't know which one did but... yes. One of them would have.'

'They're strong,' he said. It wasn't so much a threat but a reassurance to himself.

'They are.'

He looked surprised at her easy concession. 'How long have you been here?'

She cocked her head, thinking of her markings on the wall. 'About three months.'

'I've been here longer,' he said and she was reminded of games when kids would proclaim victory if they were faster than you in a race.

There was no fear. Only pride.

That thing pinged in the back of Deborah's head again, the one she got ever since Desiree started to share stories with her. Ones of a loving mother who sounded so much like Deborah's own that it made her ache for her in a way she hadn't for a long, long time.

Deborah's gaze flickered briefly to the other woman with a rare splash of blonde hair standing at the doorway.

She had been referred to as Sonya several times by the other woman Deborah had been working with to help the injured. Sonya had hardly taken her eyes off her and made it hard at times to even do a stitching, unnerving Deborah to such a point.

However, now, she was holding an elderly man's hand who was lying on one of the cots. While she still had her gun, she wasn't watching Deborah with her hawk-like eyes.

Taking a deep breath, Deborah leaned forward slightly, trying to keep her voice as low as possible.

'How long has it been... since... since you've been captured?' The words felt like an odd betrayal to even push out of her throat, which made her question if Stockholm Syndrome could be taking a hold of her.

However, she knew instantly that wasn't the case, with her or the boy, as he snorted derisively at her question.

‘Captured?’ he scoffed. ‘I think you mean saved. You fellas were gonna take me away. Desiree got me to stay with my mum.’

‘Your mum?’

‘Robin,’ he said then his eyes widened. He leaned down and whispered, ‘You can’t tell anyone I told you. She said not to tell you nothin’ so I’ll be in trouble for sure if she knows. All right?’

Deborah felt herself nodding calmly even though her heart rate was rising at an alarming rate.

‘Do you get into a lot of trouble when you do something wrong?’ Her voice felt alien.

The boy nodded. ‘Yeah, lots. She gets real crook with me, ay. I got grounded for a full week one time.’

If it would have been any other situation, Deborah would have smiled at the over-exaggeration.

Now, she couldn’t; she found it hard to breathe.

Because the world she had built up around herself had just been shattered.

Meanwhile, the boy sat down not that far from her, seemingly content to tell her all about the trouble he got into from his overly strict mum, completely oblivious to what Deborah was going through.

No matter what though, he would never be near as oblivious as Deborah had been.

All she could do was sit and listen, nodding numbly when he looked to her for agreement. He seemed to realize she wasn’t into the conversation and threw her off-guard with another question.

‘Why are you helpin’ us?’

She went to automatically say, ‘*Because I owe Desiree.*’

Instead, she came out with, ‘Because I owe you all.’

Chapter 14

The closer Natasha got to the village, waves of heat from the fire washing over her now and then, the clearer the words through the static became.

'Damn, the air force did a number here.'

'Can you just shut up and bury 'em?'

'How do you bury bits of people?'

'Christ, Reynolds, you're gonna make me throw up!'

'If you throw up again, you're doing the report to Sussler.'

Natasha frowned. Not much illegal activity felt the need to file a report. The Red Room certainly didn't prance around in the daylight doing their business. Sure, she gave mission debriefs to her matron but her matron wasn't in the public eye, hidden in the shadows even more than Natasha had been.

Sussler was part of the government and if he was doing shady activity, he wasn't doing a very good job of being discreet about it all. The clean-up crew had been getting ready to go out in front of her and the couple of men she talked to had no issue in having loose tongues.

Maybe they had gotten over-friendly sharing with her, as many men were prone to do? Somehow, she didn't think that was the case.

Still though, she kept her presence silent. When she got closer, she laid down in the sand, propping herself up with her sniper rifle, sighting everything.

The village... Ludmira, that was it... had obviously suffered from a bomb drop. It didn't look like a huge one as some of the lean-to houses still stood. However, other parts were *shattered*, unrecognizable as to what the shapes used to be, twisted and charred. She sighted only three of the six soldiers she had seen leaving the truck, digging holes.

Another two emerged, carrying a limp body in between them. They threw it into one of the holes then the other three began filling it up.

'What a job,' the communicator crackled in her ear.

Suddenly, she could see the missing sixth, hidden between a couple of the houses with a sniper rifle of his own. He was aiming in the opposite direction to her. Obviously, they weren't waiting for the threat to come from where they had been.

She decided it was time to mix things up. Holding the army communicator up to her mouth, she clicked the button which would allow her voice to be heard.

‘Agent Romanoff, requesting approach. Over.’

Rather than the soldiers jumping in shock or looking at each other in fear or even scrambling to hide anything they were doing, they all glanced at each other in confusion. The sniper turned around, not quite taking his eyes off his post but curious as to what was going on.

One of the soldiers who had been carrying the body, insignia on his hat indicated he was a corporal, grabbed his own communicator.

‘Please repeat the request, over.’

‘Agent Romanoff, requesting approach. Over.’

They looked between each other again before the corporal began to talk rapidly to them, looking like he was explaining something.

‘Agent Romanoff, you have permission to approach. Where are you approaching from? Over.’

‘South-west. Approaching now. Over and out.’

She kept her eye through the scope and watched the sniper in particular when she gave that information.

He stayed in his previous position. The red dust made it harder to make him out at stages, but she still managed. The other soldiers went back to their business while the corporal headed away from the work to the outer parts of the village, waiting for her approach. He didn’t pull his weapon.

Using the limited visibility to her advantage, she kept a slow approach for a while, watching the whole time to see if anything changed.

But nothing did.

Finally, she let the rifle down and walked quickly until she could see the corporal without aid.

He spotted her at the same time and saluted. ‘Agent Romanoff. General Sussler told me you were helping us track down the Nhuungku group.’ He seemed chuffed. ‘I didn’t think I would get to see it in person.’

‘Your lucky day then,’ she said with a wink and she didn’t miss how he stumbled over his next words.

‘Yes, well, I’m about due for one. This detail is killin’ us all. Did you have a lead all the way out here?’

‘One of the unsearched areas,’ she lied. ‘I thought some of the locals might give me some information.’

He snorted. ‘Sussler tell you they aren’t exactly the friendliest?’

‘I can be persuasive.’

He laughed. ‘I’m sure you can.’ The hair on the back of her neck stood at the repetitive phrasing as he continued. ‘Afraid though you’re a bit too late with this one.’

She cocked her head to the side. ‘Too late?’

‘Yep, air strike. After the perimeter breach this morning, some of our birds went up and it looked like it was a gathering here of armed insurgents.’ He made a face. ‘Looks like they read it wrong. Nothing but locals.’

The reds were creeping at her peripheral. Her skin began to crawl. ‘That’s terrible.’

‘What happens when terrorist groups form,’ he shrugged. ‘Say they are out to help the people and all that jazz but look what comes of it.’

She refused to look where he indicated, because she had already seen a glimpse. A small hand underneath one of the corrugated sheets. The rest of the body was indescribable.

For the first time, she wanted to throw up from the smell.

‘We had evacuated this one of kids,’ he said. ‘Looks like they hid some from us. Damn terror it is. No matter how much we try and protect ‘em, they just won’t let us, you know?’

Before she could even begin to comprehend all the red and black stimuli coming at her at once, a gunshot rang out.

Desiree couldn’t hear anything other than the crackling fires still dying down. Still though, she moved cautiously along with Robin, peeking under some of the collapsed humpies to see if there were any survivors.

There were people there, but none alive.

Some faces she recognized from when she would come here with a feed for the old people. They were mostly the only ones left in Ludmira, save for about five mothers with only two of their children. One of the kids Robin had brought into the

hideout earlier. But his little sister, Marissa, was still out here. Desiree hadn't come across her body and was praying to anything listening that she wouldn't.

Other faces were beyond recognition, but that didn't stop the sadness still emanating from the smouldering corpses. She could feel the corporeal hands grabbing at her legs, begging her to stay awhile, but she knew if she stopped now, she wouldn't be able to move for hours, too overcome with the grief pouring into her.

Robin cocked her head to the right and Desiree nodded, knowing she was proposing to split up. It made sense and there didn't seem to be anybody about.

Usually, once a raid happened, it took a while for them to come back and clean up the mess. The smell wouldn't go for days though. Something she ignored now. Not with ease, but with determination. She had a job to do, people to help.

She kept creeping forward, peeking under piles of wood, iron and steel. Some burnt her fingertips. She sucked on them before carrying on.

Despite the crackling of the fires, the smoke and growing dust storm, she was able to make out a shape in the distance.

Dashing forward, she found Marissa hunched over, holding someone's hand.

'Marissa?' she called softly, but got no reaction.

If she didn't see the moving of her chest, she would have thought the girl was dead. Creeping closer, she felt more than saw what had Marissa speechless.

Her mother, Caroline, was stretched out in the dirt, next to a collapsed roof. Desiree could feel the worry more than anything creeping over her, coming from where Caroline was impaled by a piece of wood, right through the chest.

'Oh.' The strength whooshed out of Desiree and she fell to her knees.

Marissa didn't look at her nor was she crying. She sat there, staring at her mother as she held her hand. Despite being slicked from blood, Marissa didn't appear injured herself.

Desiree slowly reached a hand out to rest on Caroline, looking to Marissa to see if that was all right. The girl didn't seem to realize she was there though. So, Desiree continued until she touched Caroline's exposed knee.

Almost immediately, those ethereal hands latched onto her and her own heart rate quickened with the palpable fear she felt for her daughter.

Caroline's daughter that was.

Blinking her eyes open, not even realizing she had closed them, she looked to Marissa again.

‘All your mum wants is for you to be safe,’ she whispered.

Marissa didn’t respond, though this time, she did look over.

‘That means coming with me, bub.’ Desiree swallowed. ‘Robin and I will come back later and put your mum to rest.’

‘Can I come see her after?’ Marissa’s voice was choked and quiet, sounding ripped raw from what Desiree might be screaming. Or smoke inhalation. Or chemicals messing with her throat from the explosion.

‘Of course.’ Desiree reached over to pull the girl into a hug.

However, she stopped when she saw blind terror in Marissa’s face.

She soon realized it wasn’t for her though when she heard the gun cock next to her head.

‘I might have to join you on that little venture,’ the soldier whispered next to her. ‘What do you say, native scum? Want to walk or go in a body bag?’

Desiree tried to stay calm; think it through. Caroline’s old fears mixed with her own. She couldn’t move.

The soldier grinned. ‘Another gin here with you, is there? You know what that makes you, right?’

Desiree felt tears well in her eyes. She didn’t want this to be her last moment. She wanted to be brave, stare death in the face. But the death she had seen along the way only scared her more for what was about to come.

He pressed the muzzle of his rifle against her temple. ‘Expendable.’

The gunshot made Desiree’s ears ring. A breath sucked unwillingly in and she watched in dazed confusion as he fell over Caroline’s legs with half of his face blown off.

Robin appeared by her side and was already pulling Marissa to her feet. ‘Move it, Des. There’ll be five more coming and I think an Avenger is with them.’

Her face paled even more. ‘What?’

‘Take Marissa and run.’ Robin reloaded her gun, the empty cartridge falling to the ground with a dull thud. ‘I’ll hold them off.’

All Desiree could do was nod and pull Marissa along in a blind run into the desert.

It was only when she escaped the confines of the village did she realize she had forgotten her gun.

Natasha had already taken refuge in one of the half-collapsed houses before the corporal gave any orders.

‘Enemy nearby! Regroup at the safe point *now*.’

She listened for any more rapid fire. When there wasn’t any, she used the network of broken debris as shelter to scurry through like a rat through a maze. The soldiers began calling off through her communicator, with one missing and unaccounted for.

‘Williams, report,’ the corporal kept saying.

No answer.

She allowed that to fade into the background as she kept going, holding a mirror around corners before she took them, searching and moving, searching and moving. Now and then, her feet would crunch on broken glass or fried corpses.

Finally, she came across a skewered body with the very fresh corpse of a private strewn over it.

Ducking back immediately into the heaps of debris, she used her mirror to once again examine the blind area.

He was dead, no doubt about that.

‘Target located and deceased,’ she whispered into her communicator. ‘No enemies sighted. North-east quadrant of the village.’

Swearing followed her statement but she took no notice as she continued her search.

In the mirror, she caught a glimmer of movement. Without even thinking, she turned and kicked the beam she was next to. It worked like dominoes as wood, poles and steel toppled over, sending iron sheets cascading. The shriek of pain was distinct even in the cacophony of clashing metal.

No matter how far away she had gotten into the red dust and away from Ludmira, Desiree recognized that sound. It was the same noise Robin made when they had been playing on a makeshift slide. They had made it out of corrugated iron, propping it up with piles of wood to give it the slant. At just seven-years-old, they

didn't consider how sturdy the slide was and it collapsed, pinning Robin's arm underneath it. Desiree had never heard Robin scream up to that point

Marissa heard it too. She looked to Desiree, eyes wide.

Desiree glanced back to Ludmira from where they stood on the crest of a hill. The dust storm had blown up completely now, almost hiding it from her vision. The sun was barely breaking through, causing an eerie red to permeate everywhere she looked.

'Bub.' She crouched down in front of Marissa and gently stroked the pad of her thumb along the girl's cheek. 'I know you've been such a brave girl but I need you to be brave one more time. Okay?'

Tears came to Marissa's eyes. Still though, she gripped onto Desiree's hands with her own blood-stained ones.

'Okay, Aunty,' she whispered.

Desiree swallowed down the panic in her throat. Now was not the time to freeze. It had already cost them.

It had already cost Robin.

She stood and pointed into the distance. 'Run, bub,' she breathed. 'Run with the sun to your back. Don't look back and don't stop until you reach the boab trees with the cloth in them.'

Marissa did as she was told, running a few steps before calling back, 'When will you come back?'

Desiree didn't answer despite hearing her, already running in the other direction.

Natasha came around the corner to see a woman with dark brown skin and a wild mass of curls barely held back in a bun trapped under the debris. The woman had managed to wriggle her arms free and was trying her best to escape but each time she moved, more weight would shift down on her, causing her to wheeze in pain.

When she spotted Natasha, she did a double-take. Blood trickled down from a fresh cut on her forehead while a plain triple 2 gun was trapped at her side, unable to be used.

Recognition flooded her face but no fear came with it. Instead, she snarled and spat, rocking back and forth as much as her position allowed, looking half mad with the pain.

‘Avenge, avenge,’ she sing-songed in an off-accent, eyes trained on Natasha’s own rather than her sniper rifle. She launched into an odd rhyme. ‘Such a good little girl, killing when they say, cutting throats and hearts every day.’

Natasha didn’t say a word and strafed closer. She could hear the soldiers’ voices only through her ear piece, shouting and regrouping in a mad panic, constantly asking the others if they saw anyone coming for them.

The woman spat again, blood mixed in with the saliva. It sunk into the dirt immediately.

‘Oh, a white ghost.’ She gestured at Natasha then promptly cringed as the weight on her groaned. ‘How original,’ she huffed through laboured breathing.

For once in her life, Natasha paused, unsure of her next move in a mission. Thankfully, the mission part of her took over, as it always did.

‘Are you part of the Nhuungku terrorist group?’

The woman actually laughed, a horrible, grating noise that seemed to hurt her more than the debris. She smiled widely, all teeth and venom.

‘Oh, sister, you have no idea.’

Natasha heard a footstep a split second over the voices in her ear and the crackling of fire. Spinning around, she aimed her gun at the occipital lobe of the other foreign woman who had been approaching her from her blind side.

‘No!’ The crazy women in the debris screeched, scrabbling and scrambling, trying to get some purchase, but only succeeded in getting herself further trapped. At the rate she was going, she was going to crush herself.

The new intruder stopped dead. She let out a shaky breath, deep-set eyes huge.

Quickly, Natasha took note of the surroundings, seeing no other approaching enemies. Not to mention that this one was unarmed or at least, from what she could see.

‘Get next to her,’ Natasha said, jerking her head to the trapped woman, strafing to the side so she had them both in her line of sight.

The woman cautiously followed her instructions. Upon seeing the other underneath the collapsed roof, she took another shaky breath.

‘Robin,’ she said, her voice holding a tinge of the accent, but not near as much as the other one. Robin.

‘Naïve idiot,’ was all the other one said, madder than before, even attempting to go for her gun. Natasha would have let off a shot if Robin even had a chance of reaching it. ‘Naïve idiot, naïve idiot, naïve idiot!’

Her voice warbled between falsetto and deep, guttural anger, and her eyes found Natasha once again. At that moment, Natasha knew she was the one who needed to be watched because if given the chance, this Robin would have no hesitation in killing her.

‘Where are the captives?’ she said, not wasting a second because she didn’t know if her upper hand would remain that way. One thing Natasha had learnt was not to be smug about being on top because it could turn on a dime.

That Robin laughed again and spat. ‘You’re lookin at ‘em.’

The other woman didn’t say anything though. She stared at Natasha with something akin to hope. It was the strangest reaction Natasha had ever received when aiming a gun at someone.

‘It’s not what you think,’ she said.

Natasha refused to let uncertainty taint her actions.

‘I’m not asking again.’ She aimed the gun pointedly at the woman.

‘Coward,’ Robin spat while the woman stared calmly back at her.

Sadness coloured everything about her as she shook her head. ‘Then don’t. Because I’m not going to give you the answer you want. But I can give the one you need.’

She was game; Natasha would give her that.

‘You have a limited time right now.’ Natasha took a step closer, letting her know just what was at stake.

The woman shook her head. ‘You don’t understand. If we bring those children back, they will be taken to a world they don’t know, that they don’t *want*, away from family, *love*, and be trained to be everything that isn’t them.’

Natasha’s mind faltered at the word ‘train’. It brought back a history of not being able to sleep without having her wrist hand-cuffed to bed heads and snapping swan-like necks between her own fragile fingers.

‘You’re wasting your time,’ the Robin woman hissed but the other didn’t listen, standing, pleading her case with everything she was worth.

Now that Natasha was closer, she could see not only the sadness, but the pure desperation of her, ready to be shot dead if so be it. But, damn it, she was going to try to make it out alive.

To survive.

‘Please,’ she begged. ‘Believe me when I say, I’m only trying to save them.’

‘I’ve heard those words before,’ the words fell, unbidden, from Natasha’s lips, remembering how her mistress said she had saved her from a world of poverty and gave her a purpose in life.

But what if it was the soldiers scrambling in her ears who were the ones trying to help in the way her mistress did?

The red was closer than it had been in a long, long time, pulsing out of her heart and threatening to strangle her.

‘And some have been true,’ the woman said, ‘and some have been lies.’ She pointed to the direction of where Natasha had come from, obviously indicating the compound and everything it encompassed. ‘Which one are you going to believe this time?’

Natasha suddenly came to the end of her beam. All she could see was mist, threatening to push her into a world of unsureness and nothing, where her life and everything she was worth held no meaning.

In a rare moment of where she just snapped, she kicked the woman back and backhanded her, sending her sprawling in the dirt.

‘Scum, scum,’ the Robin sang, ‘avenge, avenge.’

Meanwhile, the other woman laughed brokenly, though it looked more like she was crying, even when Natasha pressed the muzzle to her forehead.

‘No more head games,’ she growled. ‘Tell me.’

The woman laughed her crying laugh again. ‘Or don’t believe me,’ she said, a dribble of blood coming down the side of her mouth where Natasha had struck her. ‘Either way, I’m going to keep those kids safe. From them. If it needs to be, from you too.’ She closed her eyes and breathed, ‘Here was hoping you weren’t one of them.’

The words snapped the chains on that little box in Natasha’s head. Emotions overflowed, on the verge of overwhelming her.

Swallowing, she pressed the muzzle harder into the woman’s skull.

Then, she got ready to make a decision she knew she was going to end up regretting.

Desiree tried her hardest not to cringe in pain as the gun pressed further against her as though it was making an imprint into her skin.

She could hear Robin hissing and growling in the background, trying her best to scare off the Avenger woman. Just like she used to do when they were kids, Robin became the loudest and most vicious to get people to leave them alone. This time though, it wasn't going to work.

Desiree wanted to believe she was all right with that. But deep down, she knew she wasn't. Faces of Daniel, Marissa, Callie, Oscar and so many of the other kids flashed through her mind.

So much so, it took her a moment to realize that the pressure of the gun was no longer against her head.

Blinking her eyes open, trying to see through the dusty haze, she watched as the red-headed woman took a step back.

Desiree stared at her, feeling too scared to breathe let alone ask what was happening.

Then, the red-head clarified it for her, jerking her head to where Robin was shocked into silence, still pinned under the debris. Behind them all, Desiree knew the open expanse of the desert was there, beckoning to them with freedom.

'Go on,' the red-head said, voice as velvety and smooth as it was before, though this time, there was a different sense of urgency to it. 'Get up and help your friend.'

Desiree couldn't move, frozen in fear. Then it hit her that this was actually real.

'Thank you,' she breathed, 'thank you, thank you, thank you.'

'Don't thank me,' the red-head hissed. 'Just help her and get out of here. They could be coming any minute.'

Desiree didn't let herself get told for a third time. She staggered up, ignoring her throbbing head, and rushed over to Robin. Counting to three, she lifted one of the small trusses pinning Robin.

Robin gasped, the pressure release probably as much a relief as it was a pain. She began to scramble free.

‘Leave the gun,’ the red-head specified, green eyes trained on Robin as she crawled out of the trap.

Robin growled but didn’t say anything, stumbling to try to get to her legs. Dropping the trusses, Desiree wrapped Robin’s arm over her shoulder, taking her weight.

‘Don’t need help,’ Robin muttered but didn’t attempt to pull away, leaning heavily on her.

Desiree looked out to the distance, to the swirling red dust that would soon swallow them up. Away from Ludmira, away from the smoke, away from the corpses. She couldn’t believe she was about to run back into it when not a moment before, she was sure both of them were as good as dead.

She turned one more time to the red-head.

Natasha, the name breathed into her mind, bringing memories of newspaper clippings she had seen about a mysterious woman with a dubious past. One that changed upon whoever one asked so in the end, it was clouded in blood, secrets and death.

Desiree didn’t care though. All she could see in this woman, *Natasha*, was another sister.

‘You have no idea what you’ve done for us today,’ she said, physically unable to express the gratitude she needed to in those few short seconds.

Natasha’s expression was indeterminable. Her gun was trained on them, but loosely now, like her heart wasn’t in it.

‘Go,’ she whispered. ‘Just go.’

This, Desiree didn’t need to be told again. She began to run as best as she could, while dragging Robin along beside her.

Natasha kept her rifle trained on them as they ran. She envisioned shooting them in their backs, something every girl who had been handcuffed to those beds at night would have done.

She watched as they disappeared into the red ether, yet she still didn’t put down her rifle. Through her scope, she could make out their shimmers despite the

growing storm and their red costumes, very similar to her own. So unlike the green camo every other soldier stuck to.

Only then did she lower her weapon. No matter how long she kept it up there, nothing would change. Natasha wasn't going to fire.

Deep down, as soon as that other woman started speaking, Natasha knew she wouldn't shoot.

In her ear, she could hear the soldiers forming little groups to start a search, deciding back-up wasn't needed until they ascertained more of the situation.

She clicked her communicator on. 'Don't worry about it, fellas. I've searched the premises. No sight of anyone.'

The replies she got appeared to be in more relief than anything.

Except one.

'I'm not so sure about that, sugar.'

She stopped dead.

Maybe it was because she'd been out of the game for a long time; or maybe it was because she had been overwhelmed by her emotions.

Either way, she had completely forgotten about the sniper.

Desiree could finally see the crest of the hill emerge out of the whirling dust storm. It was harder to run up it this time with half-dragging, more carrying Robin. Her own head felt heavy from the blow, but she kept on blinking rapidly to try to keep her vision from fuzzing. She waited for a bullet in her back from that Natasha.

She wasn't naïve enough to believe someone couldn't double-cross.

'Where's Marissa?' Robin said, doing an amazing job of keeping her voice free from pain. Her face wasn't even creased. If it wasn't for the way she stumbled along, it would have been like she wasn't hurt at all.

'I had to tell her to run.'

'Hell, Des,' Robin snapped.

'I had no choice when you didn't show up! Don't worry, she knows her way around this land. We'll find her at the boob trees.'

‘No one can call you ye of little faith,’ she said. But the way she looked at Desiree, like she was some sort of miracle worker, made Desiree feel the weirdest and most special she ever had in her life.

‘What?’ she asked with a half laugh, feeling giddy. It was probably a lot from the feeling in her head, but the further they got away, the more she felt lighter and couldn’t quite believe she wasn’t dead yet. She gripped Robin a bit closer just because she could. They were going to make it. *They were actually going to make it!*

Robin shook her head and actually smiled, even larger than the one she gave before. ‘Des, I—’

As Desiree had wished before, Robin’s smile froze on her face. Trickles of blood edged out of her mouth and stained her teeth. Her body went limp and Desiree fell with her, sliding down the crest of the hill and over the other side.

‘I think I got one!’

The proclamation was met with cheers but all Natasha could do was stand there in the swirls of red, staring into the distance.

She willed the sniper to be wrong. She found herself wishing for something even though she was no longer a little girl and had given up on those sorts of pointless things a long time ago.

However, she knew he wasn’t wrong when a wailing scream rode along the wind to her.

She closed her eyes, knowing that would be one more sound which would make the red pulse in her dreams for the rest of her days. The only thing she could do was turn away and go find the sniper.

‘Rob, Rob,’ Desiree sobbed, trying to stem the blood gushing from the wound in her best friend’s stomach. ‘Come on, my girl, talk to me. Don’t close your eyes, fight it. You know how to do that better than anyone, Rob, fight it.’

The ethereal hands were clawing at her which gave Desiree some amount of hope. Even Robin's eyes hadn't blanked out. Instead, she stared at Desiree, gasping and gurgling, trying to breathe around the blood in her mouth.

'I'm getting you fixed up, Rob,' Desiree said, grabbing her wrap from around her head and pressing it to the wound. 'You watch, I'm getting Bella, she'll dig that bullet out then you'll be snarlin' at all of us to go get you a feed. I'll get you anything you want, my girl, anything. You taught me well, you did.'

The corner of Robin's mouth ticked up, giving one of those ghastly, blood-stained smiles Desiree was too intimately familiar with.

'C'mon, Rob, don't look at me like that,' she begged.

Languidly, Robin rested a hand against Desiree's own cheek.

Desiree felt the invisible hold, not frantic anymore, but firm and steady.

Accepting.

'Rob, no,' she kept crying, brushing her hair back and pressing kisses to her face. 'You've got to come back. Daniel will be cranky at you if you're late. Come on, he'll be cranky, he will.'

Robin smiled then, a soft one, the blood sliding off her teeth to dribble over her lips.

'C'mon, Des,' she whispered. 'I always wanted to know what it felt like.'

Desiree couldn't talk anymore.

Robin grabbed her hand which had been stemming the blood and pulled it to her cheek.

'Please, Des,' she said. 'Please.'

Desiree gasped against her tears and finally looked to Robin. Her brown eyes were still just as youthful as they had been as kids.

Gradually, Desiree's hands started shaking less. She gently pressed her fingers onto Robin's face.

The creases of pain faded from Robin's temples and forehead. Her smile became less sad. Finally, her eyes closed as she breathed, 'It's beautiful, Des.'

Rather than feeling the fear, anger, worry or mental anguish as she always did when helping the dying to a peaceful death, Desiree felt the most powerful wave of grief she'd ever experienced. She closed her eyes to try to get away from the drowning sadness. But it made her sick and even more tears came as her chest *ached*.

When she opened her eyes again, she was greeted with Robin's vacant stare. Her smile was now empty.

Desiree couldn't stop the scream ripping out of her throat as she buried her face into Robin's hair and cried until she was weak. Robin's blood dripped into the sand, disappearing as though it had never been there.

Interlude 12

Danielle whistled as she looked over the reports emailed over. 'If you gave me stories like these when we were married, I never would've broken up with you.'

'I feel so valued.' Still, Stuart laughed. *'I don't want Romanoff named. It might put her job in jeopardy here. But if you could say we have support from the new Avengers Initiative, that would be great.'*

'Not getting enough toys from the big boys?'

'The drones we have are junk. This might push through that order a bit faster and give us some priority over other operations.'

'I can do that. Damn, you lost a lot of soldiers in that raid where the kids went missin'.'

'They were waiting for us and we were underprepared.' Stuart's voice had gone significantly colder at Danielle's observation.

'Hasn't stopped it from happenin' again.'

'What can I say? They know our land well.'

She snorted. 'I should say. They were there first.'

'Don't start this again, Dani. I have that from enough bleeding hearts here. And I don't see you turning down these stories.'

'Point taken. I might put them in next week.'

He sighed. *'If you get them in this week, I might be able to get you an update about Romanoff's investigation into the missing kids.'*

'Might or will?'

He sighed again. *'Okay, will. I've got a good feeling about this one. She listens good and gets by under the radar. Just what I need. Not so sure about her partner in crime. Bad feeling about that one.'*

Danielle snorted. 'Yeah. Okay. Sure.'

'Jealous, much?'

'Of her spending time with you? No, I pity her. But that ain't the reason for my derision, hon'.'

'There's so many.'

She shrugged even though he couldn't see her. 'Okay. But the threat might not be who you think it is. Don't say you weren't warned.'

'I'm shaking in my combat boots.'

She smirked. 'Okay, big man. You do that.'

'Will do. So, we have deal?'

'The one on the initial attack will be in the day after tomorrow.'

'Always knew I could depend on you, Dani.'

'Wish the same could be said for you, Stu,' she replied before hanging up so he didn't have a chance to retort.

Then, she turned to her door. 'Herb! Get in here. We need to write up a story, stat!'

Chapter 15

Ludmira was enveloped by dust as Natasha left it behind, walking to the left of the group of soldiers. She couldn't see the smoke anymore. The smells and scream were staying with her every step of the way back to the trucks. Now and then, her feet would sink into the ground where it was particularly sandy. Flies weren't bothering her anymore. Maybe they stayed with the bodies.

'Looks like you'll be writing up the report,' one of the privates said with a smirk to the sniper, who was being carried, unconscious, between two other soldiers.

'Idiot, keep moving,' the corporal snapped. 'We don't know who else is out there so we need to get far away from here. You know what happened to those blokes who went to get the Sierra kids.'

That sobered the private immediately and he grasped his gun tighter.

In a formidable line, they all walked, guns drawn. Natasha did the same beside them, rifle easy in her grip, but she still held it like she was as alert as them. She wanted to take a deep breath to ease the ice in her, but the dust was still too thick in the air.

Unlike the rest of them, she knew there had only been two intruders. Most likely, one of them was now dead. But all of the men had been too scared to venture to the north to see if that was the case, particularly with the dust storm, dead private and the sniper being found unconscious.

Natasha's step picked up at the thought of ramming the back of her rifle into his head to stop him from taking another shot. She'd come from behind so he wouldn't be able to identify her.

'They're demons when the conditions are like this,' one of the privates had whispered to her. 'Can't see 'em coming then next minute, they've riddled your buddy with bullets.'

'You've seen them do this?' she asked.

'Nah, but I heard it. No mercy, that lot.'

That's all Natasha had been hearing for the past ten minutes, them and us, them and us, a rhetoric she was unfortunately very familiar with. It was probably the first time she ever noted it though.

Soon, the two trucks came into sight, the army green managing to stand out in the red.

‘On alert!’ the corporal cried out and all guns trained on the hunched figure standing next to the hood of one of the trucks. The sniper dropped into the dirt with a thump as his two carriers let him go to draw their weapons as well.

All except Natasha.

‘Drop your weapons!’ she snapped, the command coming out naturally.

None listened to her, all weapons still trained on Bruce.

‘Identify yourself,’ the corporal commanded, hands shaking, finger uncomfortably close to the trigger.

He was going to get all of them unwittingly killed if he pulled it.

Bruce straightened, staring the soldiers down. Finally, his eyes landed on Natasha. She couldn’t be sure, but she swore he relaxed a fraction. As much as he could with four weapons aimed at him anyway.

He seemed like he wanted to say something to her but when the corporal yelled again, ‘Identify yourself or we’ll fire,’ he turned his gaze onto that man.

The corporal shivered at Bruce’s dead-eyed stare. Was it just Natasha, or did he look larger?

Not a good sign. Not a good sign at all.

‘He’s friendly, corporal, weapons down!’ she snapped again but of course, no one damn listened to her.

Slowly, Bruce held up his hands, showing no weapons. ‘Bruce Banner,’ he called out. ‘I’m Bruce Banner.’

If anything, the tension rocketed up another notch at the announcement.

‘Damn,’ the corporal hissed, hands shaking more while the other soldiers stared at him, silently asking him what the hell they were meant to do.

‘He’s with me.’ Natasha would have grabbed the corporal to try to snap him out of his panic but she was worried that any movement would send him over the edge. ‘He’s not here to hurt you. He’s my back-up. So *put the guns down.*’

She was surprised to realize that her words weren’t only said to calm, but also held truth.

Bruce twitched, gaze now trained on the corporal. ‘I would listen to her,’ he said softly. ‘I’m not too fond of guns.’

Another time, Natasha would have taken that as a threat but she now realized it was a warning flare.

Bruce knew what would happen as well if one soldier let a bullet off. He was giving them all an out.

Unfortunately, the corporal didn't take it like that. One of the privates glanced at him.

'Sir?' he asked.

'It's the Hulk,' the corporal snapped back. 'It's the damn Hulk and he's standing right in front of us.'

'He will be if you don't put the gun down,' Bruce calmly replied but Natasha knew it was false as green grew in his irises. 'I'd advise you to do it now.'

The privates all looked at each other. Their guns slowly lowered and Natasha felt like tearing her hair out that it took this long.

However, the corporal refused, sweat slipping down his forehead as he fiddled with his gun. 'Oh, man,' he said. 'You're smaller than I imagined.'

With that, Natasha leaped forward and shoved at the gun just before the corporal let off a deafening shot.

Bruce twisted to the side as the bullet clipped the side of the bonnet.

Her world exploded into ringing and red. She still managed to wrestle the weapon off the corporal and shove him to the ground. Only then did she turn to Bruce as he lay on the ground, gasping a little too hard.

Making sure to keep the muzzle to the ground, she called out, 'Are you all right?'

Bruce stared the corporal down, his gaze a startling green. 'Get him out of my sight,' he growled. 'Get him out now.'

Natasha turned to all of the privates who were crouched and trembling at the sight of Bruce fighting off the Hulk.

'Well, you heard him,' she ordered. 'Get your damn leader and get out of here.'

This time, she didn't have to repeat herself. The men gathered their stunned corporal and still unconscious sniper into their truck in record time.

'What're you doing?' Bruce gasped at her when the truck started up and began to screech away before it had time to warm up. 'Why aren't you going with 'em?'

Natasha cocked her head at him, staying exactly where she was. A good distance away, but when it came to the Hulk, there really was no safe distance.

‘It didn’t occur to me,’ she said and the truth of it would have scared her if she thought she was in danger.

But she didn’t. Bruce, or even the Hulk, hadn’t been after her. He’d been after the brain-dead corporal. Even as the truck disappeared in a cloud of dust, Bruce looked after it, grinding his teeth, obviously fighting the urge the Hulk had to tear after it.

‘Hey.’ Natasha crouched, still keeping her distance, partly feeling like a reckless idiot to draw Bruce’s attention back to her. But when he looked over, the anger dimmed and his breathing calmed. She felt more than a little powerful at that, but didn’t like the fact that she did. ‘I’ll report him. It’s fine.’

Bruce snorted. ‘I think you’re missing the fact that it’s in a soldier’s job description to shoot at me.’

She didn’t miss the fact that he referred to himself and not the Hulk. That hit her hard.

‘I didn’t,’ she tried, hoping she was on the right track of calming him down.

He chuckled mirthlessly. ‘You’re not a soldier.’

He gave her a smile then, a glimpse of a real one, as he gritted his fingers into the red dirt.

She watched the movement in interest. It was like he was desperately searching to feel something, anything, which might ground him.

‘Hey,’ she said again. This time, when he glanced at her, eyes still no closer to their normal honeyed brown, she pushed right on, a random idea forming in her head that she followed. ‘What’s your favourite colour?’

He looked at her like she was mad, before he laughed again, less bitter than before. ‘Not green.’

She smiled softly back at him. ‘Mine’s not red.’

‘Huh. This place must suck for you then.’

It had been a while since Natasha laughed not to be flirtatious, but because something was funny. Cooper and Lila were really the only people who could bring that out in her and sometimes, Clint.

Bruce watched her closely. A few speckles of brown came into his eyes.

They weren't all the way there as he kept on running his fingers through the sand, though with less urgency.

'Favourite place in the world?' she threw out, going through a list of twenty questions she played with one mobster she dated for a mission. He had been one of the less sadistic murderers in the mafia group.

Bruce laid back into the dirt. 'I don't have one,' he mumbled after a moment.

She sensed there was a lot more to that statement but now wasn't the time to pry. 'Mine's a farm that I spent some time at way back,' she said, throwing an element of truth in there.

Not because she had to but because she wanted to.

'Hmm. Sounds like there would be a lot of green there.'

She smirked. 'Not as much as you would think,' she said. Clint still hadn't gotten around to putting turf around the house, despite promising to ages ago.

He stared into the dirt swirling in the air, not seeming bothered by it getting into his eyes. The pupils looked completely brown. 'Sounds pretty nice actually.'

'It is.'

They sat there for a while. Natasha listened to the wind. Sometimes, she thought she could still hear screaming but she knew it was all in her dark imagination now.

For a moment, the dust storm eased, allowing the dim rays of the lowering sun to break through. It bathed the world of dust and clay in a hazy glow.

'Sun's getting real low,' she said. 'We should be heading off.'

'It's nice,' Bruce murmured.

Before she could ask him to clarify, he was on his feet, dusting himself off even though it made him look more rumpled, curls full of red dirt.

She followed suit, watching him out of the corner of her eye. She felt safe to walk around him and examine the truck's bonnet to see what damage the bullet caused.

'How you doin', Doc?'

He nodded shakily. 'Actually, yeah, fine,' he said, though she doubted that his fine was that good.

Very much like hers as well she supposed. Right now, she felt like her beam had spider-web cracks all through it. Yet, she couldn't jump because there was

nowhere for her to land. If she did, she would finally go crashing down, something she had avoided all her life.

She ran her hand over the hood, seeing it had clipped the metal but luckily, hadn't embedded into the motor.

'We still have a ride back. What do you know? There are miracles.'

The words felt heavy in her mouth, filled up with red, but as always, she got around it. She rarely hated her will to survive, but this was one of those times where she wondered what it would be like to be tired of it all.

She would never be though. If she was, then she would fade away and be nothing to anybody, least of all, herself.

When she turned back around, Bruce was watching her. However, rather than looking guarded or fearful, he appeared sad.

She was about to confirm if he was all right again when he said. 'God, Natasha, what happened out there? Are *you* fine?'

Maybe it was the first time he had called her Natasha, making her feel more *human*; maybe it was the open concern; or maybe, it was because the mission, the very thing which was meant to bring her value, had blown up, splattering her with someone else's blood.

For whichever the above reasons, she found herself shaking her head.

'No,' she said, shook by her own rawness. 'No, I'm not.'

If their dynamic had been something else or he trusted her enough or she trusted him enough, he might have tried to give her a hug. Instead, his gaze softened more and he held out his hand.

'How about I drive this time?'

It was a small act of kindness. But for Natasha, it was something more. Because she realized he was just... *doing* this. She couldn't see an angle. There wasn't a benefit to him gaining her trust because when it came down to it, she couldn't hurt him, physically at least. Instead, he was doing it, no conditions attached.

When she stared at him, he gave an awkward laugh and brandished his hand again. 'Come on. It's the least I can do, right?'

She didn't know how to respond so handed over the keys, watching as he loaded his motorbike into the back of the truck. At the same time, she could see that woman with her friend, Robin, staggering off into the distance, as she thanked Natasha profusely.

Her words came back to Natasha. *It's not what you think.*

When they both hopped into the cab, Bruce's hand hovered over the ignition. 'Where to?'

'Tony tracked me when he rang me. Didn't he?'

Bruce had the decency to look a little shame-faced though still seemed a tad amused. 'I told you that was his area of expertise.'

When she didn't say anything, he sighed. 'Look, it mightn't have been the best of ideas but I just... I couldn't sit there.'

A revelation hit her, so different from the usual ones when she picked out who was the traitor of the group.

Bruce had come all the way out here, risked getting shot at and inadvertently becoming a fugitive again when the Hulk would have ripped everything apart.

But did it anyway.

To make sure she was okay. Even though she didn't need protecting. But she did have support in the form of a disgruntled physicist with anger management issues. Not someone she could control into supporting her but instead... someone who supported her of their own free will.

'He wouldn't have hurt you,' Bruce mumbled, drawing the wrong conclusion from her silence. 'I just... it's stupid to say.' He looked out the window at the returning dust storm. 'Sorry. I won't make the same mistake again.'

She snorted. 'No. Because we're going to have a better plan next time.'

He blinked in shock at her but she waved for him to start the truck. 'Back to the compound. There's a few more things we need to find out before we proceed.'

He didn't question her, starting the truck and making a U-turn. He wasn't as smooth a driver as her, making the vehicle miss gears, jump and stutter. To witness the motorbike ride probably would have been entertaining as all hell.

She settled her gaze ahead, though she couldn't see more than a foot or two in front of her. She couldn't close her eyes because the rush of blood and the scream was worse than what was outside the window. So she kept on staring into the red dust, trying to leave those images behind, if just for a moment.

Because she had a mission to complete.

Interlude 13

Desiree didn't want Sonya and Alita to take her away from Robin's body. She was too weak to stop them though as they emerged through the dust storm and found her huddled under the crest of the hill, caked in Robin's dry blood.

'Hell, Desiree,' Sonya said before wrapping her arms around her.

Desiree tried to put up a fight as she was pulled away. But all she could do was stumble and crumble to her knees every few steps.

'I'll come back for her, Desiree,' Sonya was saying to her. 'Don't worry, Alita is staying with her now.'

Nothing was a comfort. She wished she could be numb to it all, but Robin's sadness still ached through her bones and it took everything not to break down again.

'What are we going to tell Daniel?' was all she could get out of her parched throat.

Sonya didn't have an answer for her because there was no best way to break it to a child that they had just lost a parent.

Despite all their practice at doing so.

'I'll do it, Desiree,' Sonya offered her, but that didn't make it better.

Nothing could.

They couldn't wrap her in a blanket because it was too hot in the underground caverns for her. They could only give her water from the underground basin and the last bit of meat they had from the last kill.

From when Robin hunted.

All Desiree could do was sit there and stare at it.

The only thing which pulled her out of her daze was the soft, 'Aunty Des?'

Desiree automatically held out her arms for Daniel to come to her but feared he wouldn't. It was natural to blame the last person who had seen his mother alive for not doing enough to save her.

It's exactly what Desiree was doing.

However, he ran into her arms and clung to her side like he would never let go. She did the same, taking note of his quick, huffing breath and warm body. She

wanted to pull him back to glimpse his bright, intelligent brown eyes, a replica of Robin's. She wanted to try to burn out the vacant stare emblazoned in her mind.

But she couldn't bear to let him go as she leaned her head on his. She couldn't close her eyes because that meant more time would pass and she would be further away from seeing Robin alive.

'Did you help her go to sleep?' Daniel whispered, referring to her specific talent in the way he always did.

Desiree had a hard time seeing what she did as not murder. The others didn't since she could only make someone 'sleep' when they were close to dying. If they had access to a hospital, so many probably would be saved or at least, given some morphine to help with the pain. As it was, Desiree was the only anaesthetic, a permanent one, and she had used her talent more than she ever thought she would.

Or wanted to.

She swallowed. 'Yeah. Yeah, I did.'

Daniel went quiet for a moment. 'She always wanted to know what it felt like,' he said and a shudder went through him. 'Wanted to know what it was like to go to sleep in peace.'

Desiree laughed because that sounded like something Robin would say when trying to be darkly funny though it wasn't a joke at all. Daniel laughed with her even though it wasn't laughing at all, but crying.

They cried together, weak, broken and lonely. Desiree didn't have to hold his ethereal hands to know his feelings.

'Your mum was right, you know?'

'She always thought so,' Daniel said with a smile through his tears.

'Well, she was, bub. We're in a war. Whether I like it or not.'

Chapter 16

Natasha went through the debriefing with Sussler on automatic pilot. Yes, she had found the body of Private Williams. No, she hadn't seen anyone near him. Yes, she searched. No, she didn't believe there had been a group, otherwise they would have ambushed all the soldiers, rather than killing one and taking off.

Funnily enough, the last statement was the detail he wouldn't accept.

'They're a crafty lot,' he said, shaking his head. 'Wait until I take you out to some more of the local villages. You'll start to realize it then.'

Natasha nodded before she was dismissed. 'I might do another round of searching at night,' she said before walking out. 'Get used to the terrain in the dark.'

'Of course, of course,' Sussler said as he picked up the phone, preparing to get a team together to go out to Ludmira to search it.

He was hardly taking notice of her. Because, what she was doing wasn't the priority.

Something tickled in the back of her mind. She wasn't here for a real purpose; it was the weight of having the backing of an Avenger. He would use her, sure, but he didn't think she would do a better job of finding the kids than he was.

Right now, that was good.

Unsurprisingly, Bruce wasn't called in to be debriefed even when she said the corporal took a shot at him.

'I'll sort it out,' Sussler had said and Natasha let him think that she believed him.

The walk back to the housing she and Bruce had been given was a lot quieter than when she left this morning. It felt ominous but everything in this land did with its constant storms.

Bruce stood at her doorway though she had said he could go inside. They both didn't comment on it and he followed her in. He sat on the floor and she sat on the chair. Together, they waited.

They kept their vigil until night fell. Natasha had to say, while the dark didn't bring warm, fuzzy feelings to her, she did like the extra cloak it gave her.

She looked to him. 'Ready?'

Unlike Clint, who would have nodded steadfastly back at her, Bruce shrugged and said, 'I guess.'

She'd take it.

Bruce didn't like feeling responsible for people. He didn't need any more guilt on his conscience than he already had. It was already enough fun to try to sleep.

He didn't know how he had somehow become actual back-up to Natasha when originally he had basically been brought here to be proven that this job was kosher. And a tad of pride and stubbornness.

Only a tad though.

However, he'd realized after his verbal scuffle with her back at the Tower that he and Natasha had very different versions of what kosher was.

She wanted to do a job that was technically legal; he wanted to support a program he could get behind morally.

In fact, legality didn't worry him so much. Let's face it, he hadn't been a darling of the law for a long, long time. Hell, even when he was technically on the right side, he'd still been shot at.

That had been fun. Nothing like attempted murder to make him feel like a valued and equal citizen.

It was times like the Ambassadorial Avengers meeting when he wanted to fade into the distance. He knew everyone wouldn't agree on what was worthy of their attention or not. Or what was right or not.

Right. What an interesting word. So simple yet one of the most technical semiotics of signification which brought on the most complex and at times, aggressive reactions.

He'd been here purely for Tony. Nothing more, nothing less.

Keep his head down. Appease Natasha until he could flee. That had been the plan.

Pfft. Plan. He should know better by now never to make one

But now, something was off with Natasha. She didn't seem as self-assured as she always was. She was hardly talking to him. Even though they had never been

exactly chatty before, she used to try to engage him in conversation to endear herself to him.

More so, so she could get on the good side of the Other Guy. He'd sometimes felt she was trying to lure him somewhere from which he couldn't return. At one point, he'd even wondered if this had all been an elaborate set-up, get him in the middle of nowhere to hopefully have one final hope of containing the Other Guy.

No. Instead, she had helped him.

He couldn't find her angle. Most eerie thing to happen to him to date. Natasha Romanoff, top spy and assassin, not having an angle.

So, he couldn't help but trail along behind her, following his curiosity and command on where they were to go next.

'So,' he said as they stepped outside, which was for once quite well illuminated by a full moon not covered by dust, 'what's the plan?'

Natasha smiled. 'I do have one.'

The answer was there without her saying. The result of this plan would designate what the next one would be.

'Okay,' he said.

Here was hoping this plan actually worked out for the best. Which way was the best, he didn't know.

Bruce looked amused at the announcement he was going to be the distraction.

'What else is new?' he muttered.

Still though, his fingers worked back and forth at his sweater. For once, he was dressed appropriately for the weather because the temperature had dropped significantly with the approach of night. It was like most deserts that Natasha had the pleasure of being in.

She thought of trying to say something comforting to him, but everything felt false on her lips. Maybe she was being unfair but she wished it was Clint next to her. He would already be outside Sussler's office door, distracting the sentry there.

It hit her she might have to give Bruce some direction on how to do just that but he was already off, entering the main compound, shoulders hunching as the soldiers at the doorway clutched their guns tighter.

That left her job.

Using the blueprints of the compound Sussler gave her—because, as he'd said with a benevolent smile, some people were bad with directions—she sighted, once again, the surveillance rooms.

There were two. One for any activity outside of the fence. The other was for whatever took place on the inside.

Striding over the compound grounds which was quieter with most soldiers in their barracks, save for a few guards, she arrived at the small concrete house that looked like an odd garden shed on the west end.

She thought of trying to see if it was unlocked but withheld herself. If she was right, it was best to raise as little suspicion as possible.

Taking a deep breath, she pulled her hair back, put on a smile and knocked on the door.

She couldn't hear anything until footsteps were right at the door. It opened to reveal the corporal who had been guarding the fence, Lewis Clarke. The man with the compulsive winking disorder.

Immediately, his face broke into a broad smile. 'Well, how you doin', chicky?'

He was Joey Tribbiani without any of the charm. Or looks. Or brains, which was saying something.

With perfect practice, her mouth slipped up into a flirtatious smile. 'Would be doing better if I could sleep.'

He nodded, trying to appear relaxed, but she could see the way he swallowed. 'Pain that.'

'Yeah,' she agreed. 'I've been looking for my friend. Thought you might be able to help me locate him.'

If possible, he looked even more pleased. 'I could definitely do that, chicky.' He stepped back. 'Come on in.'

She walked past him but turned to face him as soon as she got inside. She kept up a perfect combination of flirtatious and oblivious smiling, like she couldn't keep her eyes off him.

He pretended he didn't notice but she could see how he held himself even taller as he went to the wall of monitors.

‘He’s that short little fella, isn’t he?’ Lewis asked. ‘The one who can’t dress to save his life.’

She resisted snorting at the too-accurate description and instead, giggled. God, she hated how easily she did this sometimes.

‘That’s the one.’

He flashed her what he probably thought was a charming grin, accompanied with a wink. Leaning on his desk, he gave the monitors a cursory glance, without much concentration.

She should know; she’d already spied her unwilling partner-in-crime on the monitor in the far corner. The blue-grey screen flickered once, twice, showing the fuzzed image of Bruce with the sentry.

No one had pulled a gun on him yet so she was taking that as a tiny victory. Still though, she wasn’t going to push her luck.

‘So,’ Lewis glanced at her again, ‘what actually brings you out here...’

‘Natalia.’

‘Natalia,’ he said, as though tasting her name and suddenly she was grateful for giving a name that she didn’t feel any attachment to. ‘Pretty.’

‘Why thank you.’

‘Well, what brings you out here, Natalia?’ He winked again. ‘Long way from any shoe shop.’

‘What can I say?’ she said, glancing him up and down. ‘I have more interests than shoes.’

She could see that shift in him that she wanted. ‘You’re... not related to Sussler or anything are you? Because, chicky, I don’t think he’d be too thrilled if I—’

This time, she winked at him. ‘Not even remotely.’

Damn, it felt good to lie again with no guilt attached to it.

Lewis was upon her then, kissing her like he knew what he was doing but he had no idea of the meaning of ‘Less is more’.

She let him take the lead, giving enough to give the illusion she was into it.

‘Oh, damn,’ he murmured, like she was doing something amazing when she was doing the bare minimum of stroking his shoulders and being receptive to his kisses. Mostly because she needed the rest of her energy not to heave.

It was kind of a killer to the mood.

Unlike him, she was patient and waited until he was comfortable, trailing kisses down her neck. Then, she grabbed him by the back of his collar and made his head collide with the steel bench.

The sound of the clanging steel was so satisfying that she had to hold back a pleasurable shiver.

‘Oh, yeah, that’s the stuff.’ She stepped over his limp body and carried on her self-appointed mission.

It didn’t take her long to turn off the surveillance while deleting the video for the last hour in the main building’s hallway and outside this miserable shack with its even more miserable human.

Then, she went outside to the still silent night. She got up on the compound roof with relative ease. It felt like she was so close to the sparkling sky that she could have reached up and her hands would be stained with dark blue ink and glitter.

Creeping along, she soon came across the skylight she wanted. It was lit up quite nicely by the full moon. Peering in, Sussler’s office was much neater than when Natasha had seen it. There were no multiple folders strewn out across the desk. Instead, they were most likely in the filing cabinets lining the walls, along with more maps.

Rubbing her gloved hands together, she easily picked the lock of the skylight and slipped inside, using anything like curtain holds and lamp fixtures to help her ease herself to the floor in a silent crouch.

Staying down, she listened.

The muffled sound of voices could be made out on the other side, showing the office was pretty well insulated but by no means sound-proof.

No worries there.

Keeping low to the ground to make sure she didn’t cast a silhouette against the door to alert the guard, even if Bruce had him distracted or not, she crept to the filing cabinets. With another good use of her lock-picks, she had four unlocked in no time.

‘Let’s see what you’re hiding.’

Not that she expected to see all the secrets filed away to be looked at later. But she was a master of spotting discrepancies in dates, numbers and events.

If they were hiding something, in her experience, it popped its head up, one way or another. This was the starting point and she was planning on it being a long night.

Sure enough, a theme did emerge.

Just not the one she thought would. Somehow, it was worse than what she had expected.

Interlude 14

Deborah thought something must be terribly wrong as soon as Sonya took the boy and left her post. Bella, the other nurse, was the only one left to act in any capacity as a guard and she was too busy tending to patients.

Deborah knew she wasn't being trusted; she had a feeling Sonya had no choice but to go.

Bella didn't say much either way, keeping her head down as she checked on the patients to make sure they weren't developing fevers which would be indicative of an infection of their wounds.

One had died about four hours ago. Deborah wished she could say that he had slipped off peacefully but he had died screaming, holding his stomach and coughing up blood.

It made her shiver to think about that, dying in some sort of cave, with no pain killers, no family, but hoping some stranger would save you, only for that not to be the case.

Yet, this was what they chose, over staying in the missions. To be fair, these injuries had occurred while in the Ludmira mission.

'Bomb dropping,' one of them had managed to say to Bella and Deborah overheard. 'Don't think it was targeted but...'

In the end, it didn't matter if it was targeted or not. The damage was done; the deaths had occurred; the pain couldn't be taken back.

'Where's Desiree?' Deborah couldn't stop herself from asking in a quiet minute when Bella finished one of her rounds.

'No one knows where Desiree is these days.'

There was something else in that but Deborah didn't have a clue as to what. All she could do was sit in her claimed corner, no use at the moment, and have the foreboding feeling grow. She even wished to be taken back to her cell because the taste of freedom was maddening.

When there was running feet, she resisted the urge to try to take up a weapon. It was a different woman who Deborah hadn't seen before and she felt slightly proud of herself she could even tell that.

Bella and the new person exchanged a glance before they swapped places, the woman muttering something in Bella's ear as she left.

'What's going on?' The words came out of Deborah's mouth before she could stop them.

She instantly regretted drawing attention to herself as this newcomer turned a deadly glare on her.

'Wouldn't you like to know, kidnapper?' she spat and Deborah became increasingly aware of the handgun in the other's hand.

The words hit her hard.

Facts and truths were dissonant and not lining up the way she had been taught they would. They had become most disjointed talking to that boy and now she realized how much she needed to realign everything completely.

'Sorry,' she said, dropping her gaze.

'Sure you are. We haven't heard that one before. Didn't end up changing all that much.'

Deborah flinched but responding wasn't going to win her a friend here. Suddenly, her fear for Desiree grew as she felt how much their demises could be linked right now.

Someone's moan startled her out of her own worries. She automatically went to go to the boy they set the leg for but found herself on the wrong end of the handgun.

She slowly held her hands up. 'I was only going to check on him. That's why I'm here.'

'Why you're here is a mystery to us all,' the woman said.

Deborah didn't have a response and could only stand there, hands up in the surrender. It rocketed her back to the day she was taken, the confusion, the panic, the *fear* she had felt. A lot of anger too, of how dare she be ripped away from her people, her friends, no contact with her dear family and losing a friend while she was about it.

Now, she couldn't feel anything but hollow, calmly watching the gun. A part of her wished it would go off; the other part of her, the one she wanted to be more of, told her that was no fair way to go out.

The woman watched her, as though daring her to make a move.

But, Deborah stayed still.

When another moan came from the boy, the woman's determination shimmered. After another good two minutes, she lowered the gun.

Deborah nodded to her in which she replied with spitting on the floor. Deborah edged past her and to the boy.

'Hey,' she whispered to him and he blearily blinked his eyes open. 'What can I do, hon'? Water? Some food?'

For a moment, panic filled his expression but just as quickly, recognition flashed across his face.

It had taken surprisingly quick for this to happen. Most of the patients accepted more or less instantly that she was helping, not trying to hurt them. Even though, half of what she had done actually caused them pain. She had never done stitching without anaesthetic in her life and never wanted to again.

The muted gasps of pain as they tried to stay quiet were ingrained in her brain like they had been screaming.

'Water?' he gasped. 'Please?'

The other woman watched Deborah's steps cautiously but didn't try to hinder her as she ran across the room to get a clay-like cup and dip it into the bucket of water. The water was gritty with dirt floating down from the roof above but it tasted fresh enough.

'Here.' She held it to his mouth but he held it himself despite his arms looking like skinny twigs she could snap.

'Thank you,' he said after a few sips, resting the cup on his chest. Most of the people's clothes were stained with blood, some which wasn't theirs. She could only imagine what sort of injuries there had been with something like a bomb.

They were lucky nine were alive.

She couldn't bring herself to say *you're welcome* so sat on the edge of the cot, looking at her own blood-stained hands. It was dried under her fingernails.

Despite still gasping shallowly in pain, he pushed himself up on an elbow, hazy eyes taking in the other bodies.

'You shouldn't...' she said, waving a hand, afraid any more movement would make him in more pain that she couldn't take away.

He collapsed back and barely hid his moan. Deborah remembered one of her little cousins who was eleven, probably around the same as this boy. He had come off

his bike and skinned his knees. The whole family didn't hear the end of it for weeks, even long after the scabs had healed, leaving the white marks.

'Marissa.'

'What?' Her head snapped to him.

Tears came to his eyes. 'Marissa isn't here,' he whispered.

Before she could understand what he meant, the other woman jumped in.

'We're lookin' for her, bud. As hard as we can.'

That didn't appease him and his chest shuddered with the tears he couldn't repress.

Deborah couldn't think of what to do. The image of Desiree huddled next to her cell as they shared stories of their mothers in hushed, revered tones made her grasp at straws.

'Hey.' Without thinking, she grasped his hand. In the background, she could hear the woman make an indecipherable sound but Deborah pushed on. 'Why don't you tell me about her?'

He continued to shake and cry, face becoming more twisted in pain. It took him a while to register what she said.

'What?' he asked, voice breaking.

'Tell me about her. Just tell me about her. Everything and anything you think of, tell me.'

He stared at her, hiccupping softly with the tears.

'Go on. First thing that comes to your mind. First thing.'

He continued to stare and Deborah felt she was going to get lost in the heartbreak of his eyes. Until, finally, he spoke.

'She... she likes climbing trees. Not much where we live now, but she... she really likes that.'

'I've always been scared of heights.' Deborah's voice was barely a whisper, afraid she would somehow break the mood.

However, he calmed. Snot streaked under his nose but he didn't seem to have the strength or the want to wipe it away.

'Me too.' It may have been the weak light, but she swore she saw a crook at the corner of his mouth. 'Marissa isn't though.'

'She sounds brave.'

'Kinda, I guess. She's afraid of snakes though. I'm not afraid of snakes.'

‘I used to be afraid of snakes as a kid. I’m not anymore. Seen too many.’
‘Marissa should be scared of dingoes. She’s not though. Wants to pet ‘em.’
‘Sounds like she needs a dog.’

A shudder ran through him at that and he closed his eyes. ‘Used to. Don’t have one anymore.’

‘Does she have a favourite game?’ she said, trying to push him on from the subject she’d inadvertently turned him to.

‘Hide and seek. I’m better at it but she likes it.’

‘I loved tag.’

This time, there was a real smile. ‘Marissa falls to her knees whenever you try to tag her. She’s terrible at it.’

Deborah laughed even though it was the hardest thing to do as she sat and reminisced with this little boy who had nothing to smile about but still did anyway.

Deborah fell asleep, curled up next to the boy’s cot. She found out his name was Malcolm.

‘Mandy for short though,’ he said with another smile that spoke there was something deeper to that nickname.

She woke up to nothing, wondering why she did. The woman was no longer standing at the doorway. For the strangest reason, it made Deborah feel scared.

Sitting up, long used to a dirt floor for a bed, she looked around, trying to see what had disturbed her surprisingly peaceful sleep.

She finally spotted a figure in the opposite corner. She thought it was one of the injured who had gotten out of bed, hobbled a few steps and collapsed.

‘Are you okay?’ she called softly, crawling to her knees.

A match illuminated the doorway with a scratch and hiss before being put in a lantern. Soon, the area was lit in a soft light which should have been calming, but wasn’t.

Sonya stood in the doorway, holding the lantern, casting enough light for Deborah to see it was Desiree in the corner Deborah had previously occupied.

‘She wanted to see you,’ Sonya said, voice even in a way that was trying so hard to be calm.

Desiree was asleep, head slumped to the side. Her neck would be hurting. Her clothes were no longer the red robes she always wore but instead, was a simple black dress. Her bare feet were wedged into the dirt like it had been done on purpose.

‘Don’t wake her,’ Sonya commanded. ‘She needs to sleep.’

‘I wasn’t going to,’ Deborah felt obliged to whisper back but was silenced by one look.

However, the effect didn’t last long as she glimpsed the empty cot she’d rested beside.

‘Where’s Mandy?’ This time, she didn’t regret her words as panic seized her, making her scramble to look over the bed and under it, to make sure he hadn’t somehow crawled under the bed with his setting leg.

A flash of surprise came over Sonya’s face. ‘Did he tell you his nickname?’

Deborah didn’t even reply but looked to her, more demanding then begging, ‘Where is he?’

Sonya took her time answering, studying her intensely before saying, ‘With Marissa.’

Deborah felt like she could actually take a proper breath. ‘She’s alive?’ she whispered.

Sonya nodded slowly. ‘Yes. Desiree and... Robin found her.’

Then, she looked behind Deborah and promptly disappeared, though she left the lantern.

Glancing behind her, Deborah saw Desiree’s eyes were open.

They both didn’t say a word to each other, watching.

‘Robin’s dead.’ Desiree finally broke the silence. The usual accent was deadened and she seemed to see right through Deborah.

For the third time, Deborah couldn’t say the things she normally would have like *I’m sorry* or *That’s shocking*. They felt shallow and cheap coming from her lips.

Before the silence could stretch on longer, Desiree spoke again.

‘We couldn’t burn her. She wanted to be turned to ashes. With the air raids, we couldn’t. Someone might see.’ The next words appeared to be the hardest for her to get out as she said, ‘We had to bury her.’

Deborah sat silently, feeling more alone then she had since she had been taken.

Desiree carried on, unblinking. 'We only went there to clean up their mess. To save anyone. Before they died. Or were taken.' She frowned in hurt confusion. 'Why?' she said, as though the question was perfectly clear and, in a strange way, it was. 'Why?' she said again.

Suddenly, Deborah missed the quietness in the cell. She missed the obliviousness.

'Because we don't understand,' was the only thing she could get out.

'You don't try!' Desiree's scream was startling and inhuman. Her hands clenched into fists and she punched the ground before pulling at her hair. A sob finally burst through her walls. 'Why don't you try?' she begged, eyes squeezed shut, hands held over her head. It was like she was trying to hide from it all.

But no matter how much she tried, she would never be let be. Deborah knew that for a fact and she hated herself for it.

All she could do was sit there and listen to Desiree going from hitched breathing to sniffing.

'Christ.' Deborah felt heavy and helpless. She wanted to hide for reasons that she hated. 'Why don't you hate me?'

She hadn't meant to say that, but couldn't stop it.

Desiree looked to her, hurt confusion painfully clear again on her face. 'I don't know,' she said, shaking her head. 'I wish I did. I wish...' she gritted her teeth, pulling at her hair, 'I wish killing you would make me feel better. Make me feel like I've avenged Robin.' She began to cry for real then, gasping for breath. 'But I don't,' she said, shrugging helplessly. 'I can't hurt you. Or hate you. No matter how much I wish I could.'

Without thinking, Deborah slid over next to her. If she was pushed away so be it.

But of course, Desiree didn't. She allowed Deborah to give her the most tentative of hugs. While she didn't return it, she allowed it and that was the biggest thing.

They both sat there and cried, for completely different reasons, and in that moment, Deborah felt something in herself change.

She had felt brave and determined when she joined the army to help in the fight to bring the Indigenous people into civilisation and save the children.

Now, she felt brave and determined in a completely different sense.

‘You can go in a couple of days,’ Desiree whispered as she leaned against the wall.

‘What?’ The way Deborah had envisioned it every single time she escaped or even when she believed Desiree might let her go, her heart would soar.

Now, it sunk.

‘I’ll take you partway then leave you from there. You can understand why.’

There was something so wrong here. ‘What are your plans, Desiree?’ she asked.

‘Plans,’ Desiree sighed, leaning back and staring up at the ceiling of rock and dirt. ‘I’ve had so many plans.’ She swallowed. ‘Robin did too. Let’s hope this one actually works.’

‘What can I do to help?’ This time, the words didn’t just drop out of her mouth. Instead, Deborah had sat there and thought about it, probably ever since Desiree and she had started talking and sharing stories.

No. This wasn’t a whim. It was the first calculated and informed move she had ever made as a soldier.

‘You can’t help us, Deborah. You know you can’t.’

‘I can and I will.’

Desiree simply smiled at her and it hurt. ‘No one can help us.’

Chapter 17

Bruce came stumbling back through her door, looking utterly done.

‘That’s got to be the most awkward conversation I’ve ever had in my life,’ he said. ‘And that’s saying something. Next time you need someone to play decoy, get a person with actual social skills.’

He paused, head tilting. ‘Hey...’ his voice trailed off.

Natasha sat on the desk, liking how it was higher than the bed, knees to her chest. In her now un-gloved hands were her Widow Bites. She slipped the metal circles between her fingers, watching as they reflected the overhead light.

Bruce glanced at the doorway like he was figuring out if he could possibly make it acceptable to walk out before a conversation even started.

But, he stayed, sitting down on the floor near the doorway in his lotus position.

Silently, they stayed together. Natasha noted the still night outside. She wondered vaguely if Corporal Lewis Clarke had woken up yet and how much he remembered. Would that cause a disciplinary action? Would she be able to lie her way out of it?

Did she care?

‘I found some information.’

Bruce glanced at her. ‘Okay,’ he said evenly.

She didn’t add anything for another good ten minutes. Then, she found it in herself to talk some more. ‘It’s all there.’

‘Okay,’ Bruce said again but this time, continued. ‘Isn’t that a good thing though? You thought something crooked was going on and—’

‘No,’ she said, squeezing the Widow Bites, remembering when she had zapped herself with one. She could see why people sometimes screamed. The pain wasn’t necessarily intense but it was all over. ‘You don’t get it.’

It sounded like the dumbest thing to say to a genius, who probably constantly saw and understood things she couldn’t comprehend.

Bruce didn’t mock her; he waited for her to explain.

Her fingers tapped on the mini-batons Tony had made for her, combined with her usual Widow Bite shockers.

‘Everything’s there. Everything. The number of citizens who’ve died in raids when they’ve searched for the Nhuungku terrorist group, the bombs falling on the wrong villages, the removal of the kids here in Northern Hopes. Everything.’

He nodded slowly. ‘It’s not illegal what they’re doing,’ he said and there was soft understanding which hinted at Bruce suspecting something like this.

It brought her back to their original tiff that caused Bruce to be here with her in the first place. He never implied that what Alia Surat was doing to its original citizens was illegal; he implied that he didn’t like it.

We have a choice now was what he kept on saying. That *she* had a choice.

That she wasn’t a piece which could hold more value if used strategically; but that she could decide her own chess moves.

The ‘*It’s not right*’ was right on her tongue but she couldn’t say it. She’d never said something so simplistic in all her life with no strings of web attached.

‘Do you... want to go back?’ Bruce hedged.

She kept turning the Widow Bites over in her hand as that scenario played out in her mind. Sussler would spread a bad name to the senate committee in charge of the Ambassadorial Avengers Initiative. Agent Romanoff is unreliable, doesn’t complete missions, takes off when it suits her, wishy-washy in her decisions, coward, all of the above and probably a lot of others she would think of later.

She would be destined to stay in the mist, only seeing a few more steps in front of her when someone, inevitably Steve, would fight for her to be a part of something they were investigating.

What would the others think of her? Clint? Was their mission going well? Did they think what they were doing was of value? That he was making up for past wrongs?

Would he be disappointed in her for backing away from something that, in the legal sense, was right? From what, in essence, was her job?

Why did her brain fight so much against this? Everything she had wanted as she sat in Gimmelwald was sitting right in front of her now. She could find the kids, take down the core of the terrorist group and come back more valued than ever.

It was right there in her pocket, all for the taking, when she had planted the tracker on that second woman who convinced her to let the two suspected terrorists

go. She was still alive, by the way the dot moved now and then. She would be the key to leading Natasha to the hideout and becoming one of the most valued members of the Ambassadorial Avengers Initiative.

She took out the tracker now. It felt light in her hands even though mentally, she felt it should have been a lot heavier.

Bruce watched her, curiosity obvious at seeing the device, but he didn't say a word.

She ran her hands along the tracker, doing what she always saw him do, imprinting the feel of the bumpy steel into her fingertips.

Taking a deep breath, she stared into the mist, trying to ascertain, one last time, if she could see what waited for her at the bottom.

'No,' she said finally. 'I don't want to go back.'

The way he nodded his head bespoke that he suspected she would say that.

'Okay.' His voice was even but suddenly, she tapped into what that actually meant.

He was disappointed.

Maybe he was considering a way to say he was going anyway; maybe he was going to leave without a word to her, ringing Tony to get him out of here. Or leave on his own, with all his personal valued belongings packed in his bag.

He didn't say anything to her, but stood and left. It rocked her more than she thought it would.

'Guess it's just you and me,' she murmured to herself.

It was what she expected and truthfully, what she was used to.

She sat for a few more minutes, feeling sorry for herself. But it turned out, that wasn't Natasha Romanoff's style.

She always imagined what she was actually like. Of all the things she was unsure of, the one thing she knew was that she wasn't a coward.

'Who knew you were a traitor though, huh?' she said and after a small hesitation, clipped her Widow Bites back on.

She didn't feel sure like she had back when leaving the Red Room life behind with Clint.

Clint.

Taking a deep breath, she looked around at the mist one last time.

Then, she jumped.

Interlude 15

‘There’s got to be a better plan than this, Desiree.’

Sonya sat at her room’s doorway, hunched over again. If it would have been Robin, she would have been standing tall, ever present rifle in her hands.

Maya was there as well, looking weak as she sat on the pile of clothes on the ground, shawls wrapped over her bony shoulders.

Desiree looked through her mass of random objects to see if she could find some more water bottles. ‘If you can think of one, I’m all ears.’

‘How about one that doesn’t include you playing a martyr?’

She didn’t acknowledge that. Instead, she turned to Maya. ‘You know where to go, don’t you?’

Maya nodded.

Sonya grit her teeth. ‘Don’t ignore me, Desiree. You’ve been doing that enough. Not today.’

Desiree bristled, but didn’t engage. Instead, she hooked a sack over her shoulder. ‘With the death of the soldier, there should be people all over the place tomorrow. Don’t leave until tomorrow night. They should be called back by then and have to reassess. It’ll buy you some time.’

‘And you think we’ll just be welcomed into Northern harbour?’ Sonya laughed sarcastically. ‘We’re on Alia Surat’s most wanted list. And what? We’re just giving the kids up? After all this time, we’re just going to abandon them to... God, Desiree, you *know* what sort of lives they’ll have!’

Finally, Desiree spun around. ‘If they stay here, they’ll end up inadvertently killed in a raid or a stray bomb! The soldiers are out for blood here and you know it. Especially after...’ she couldn’t bring herself to say it so pushed on, ‘and I never said to give them up. Try to sneak them on a boat. We have a better chance of declaring sanctuary in another country and being taken seriously.’

‘They’ll lock us up,’ Sonya hissed. ‘They’ll take the kids and lock the rest of us up.’

‘Damn it, Sonya, what do you want from me? To die a slow death here or a quick one by battle are your only other two choices.’

Sonya was up now and facing off against her, standing taller than she ever had. 'And I'm meant to just trust your plan? Last time I checked, it got someone killed!'

The room went fuzzy.

'I held her as she died,' Desiree choked. 'I took her pain, took her sadness, took everything away and *felt* it.' She swallowed. 'So don't you *dare* accuse me of doing something flippantly now.'

Sonya had the decency to back down a step. But she didn't take back what she said.

'You can do what you want.' Desiree grabbed her bag. 'But I'm going to give you the best chance to succeed... at whatever decision you make... by taking the focus off you.' She hooked the bag tighter around her shoulder. 'It's not being a martyr, Sonya. It's doing what needs to be done.'

She leaned down and kissed Maya's cheek. The elder finally broke down and tried to hold onto her but Desiree gently pried her fingers from her clothes.

'It's goodbye, but never forever,' she whispered, pressing her forehead to her surrogate mother before forcing herself to leave before she allowed Maya to hold her back.

Without looking Sonya's way, she moved past her to where Daniel waited in the tunnel out of her designated room in one of the numerous caves.

She kneeled and he flew into her arms.

'Please try to come back,' he whispered into her hair.

'Now that I can promise,' she said, wrapping him up in the biggest hug she could manage. 'Watch over the other kids, all right?'

'I promise.'

'One last promise though.' She pulled back to hold his face between her hands and brushed away his tears with her thumbs. 'Remember to take care of yourself.'

After a quiet moment where he squeezed his eyes shut, he managed a nod.

'That's my boy.' She pulled him in for one more hug. For one last hug.

'If it comes to it...' he said but couldn't finish his sentence.

She kissed him on the temple. 'If it comes to it, I'll make sure to say hello to your mum for you.'

More of his tears fell. Unfortunately, she didn't have the time to hold him until he stopped crying like she always had.

Instead, she had to hand him off to Maya and kept moving. She couldn't handle saying goodbye to one more child so she went straight to the old, makeshift holding cells.

Deborah sat there. The cell door was now open and Alita stood guard, but it was more for show than anything.

Alita gave her a hug and stepped back.

Finally, Desiree turned to Deborah. 'Ready?'

'Ready.'

She led the white woman down the tunnels without even thinking about it. When she got to the exit, the series of footholds and ropes that led upwards and upwards until they would finally get above ground, someone's shout halted her.

Turning back around, she saw Sonya sprinting towards her.

She ran back and jumped into Sonya's arms, allowing herself to cry.

'I hope you get to take on some happiness for once,' Sonya whispered in her ear.

Out of all the people to say goodbye to, Sonya was the hardest to let go. But, she had no choice in the matter. Just as Robin had pointed out what felt like so long ago.

Sonya would have held her forever if she would've allowed it. Pulling back, Sonya wiped her eyes of tears. Then, they let go of each other's hands.

Nodding to Deborah, indicating for her to start climbing, Desiree looked one more time at Sonya, even though she knew she shouldn't.

Dark brown eyes breaking, Sonya knelt down, holding herself. It would have looked like she was praying if Desiree didn't know her better.

As Desiree began to climb, the wailing followed her up.

For once, Deborah didn't feel the need to fill the quietness between them as they stood above ground, the moonlight helping light their way. The dust was settled and Desiree could see into the distance, boab trees dotting the landscape around her.

Then, they began to walk.

Chapter 18

To book out the motorbike was embarrassingly easy with the eager-to-please sergeant still managing the vehicle compound.

The wind was cool as it whipped past her as she drove into the night. No flies bothered her. When she was walking, mosquitos were more aggressive than she'd ever experienced, but on the motorbike, she was free of them. The thrum of the motorbike was loud in a landscape which was for once, deathly still. Her world shimmered with red and black with the land and sky.

There was no turning back and she kept driving. She had already taken the time to disable the tracker on her vehicle and her communicator so if anyone rang her, it wouldn't lead to her being followed again.

While she was no expert on electronics, she knew how to become invisible when she wanted to.

She didn't expect her communicator to ring; she was so deep into her mind that she almost swung her motorbike out.

Skidding to a halt, she cut the engine, listening for any sound other than the soft ringing in her ear. She glanced at the handheld device linked to the ear piece.

She wished desperately it was Clint, but when did she ever get what she wished for?

The words were haunting her more than she thought they would. The number wasn't Clint's but also had a familiar look to it.

'What?' she asked as she answered, too tired for courtesies.

'Damn, you're grumpy for...' Tony's chipper voice paused and she could imagine him glancing at his watch, 'two o'clock in the afternoon.'

'It's two o'clock in the *morning*, Stark.'

'Morning? Seriously?' There was another pause and she could hear him muttering rapidly to himself under his breath. Damn. He even talked to himself like he was on speed. 'Oh. Right. Well. My bad. Running on like four hours sleep here. Don't be ridiculous, Artemis, I've had more than that.'

Natasha closed her eyes, overwhelmed by the realization Clint was within hearing, but she couldn't talk to him.

‘Tony,’ she sighed. ‘The point?’

‘Well, aren’t we laconic today? Tonight? Do you prefer that I refer to it as night even though it is technically day?’

‘Tony.’

‘*Fine*. Where’s Bruce?’

His name brought a lonely bitterness to her mouth even though Bruce hadn’t done anything wrong. ‘Dancing on rainbows. How should I know?’

‘Was it just me or did you used be more tolerable? He’s your backup, sunshine. I think it’s a reasonable question on my part.’

It was a little sad when she realized that indeed, Tony Stark was being more reasonable than her.

This day *sucked*. Or night. Oh, god. Now he had her doing it.

‘He’d be in his quarters. He’ll be heading back soon.’ She was amazed by how easy she said it. ‘There’s not much he can do here.’

Not unless he was ready to commit treason and she thought that was a little bit unfair to ask him to do.

‘Then why do I have a GPS signal telling me he’s heading north from the coordinates of the base?’

She frowned. Then, her heartbeat raised a fraction. ‘Come again?’

‘Bruce. His tracker. Try to keep up.’

Ignoring the bait, she asked, ‘Specifics, Stark.’

‘Fine, *Romanoff*. Do you watch *Person of Interest*?’

Breathing slowly and praying to whatever devil backing her that this wasn’t some aggravating non-sequitur, she kept her voice even. ‘Yes.’

Clint had gone on a craze of it. They used to watch it together when they wound up on the Helicarrier together, spending nights where they were meant to be recuperating from a mission, watching Jim Caviezel beat up mobsters.

Now, she didn’t think she could watch it. The thought of sitting there, watching an ex-spy try to have a fulfilling life after losing everything, didn’t sound like the best way to pass the time to her anymore.

‘Then you should recall a particular episode where Harold was kidnapped? And Reese had to find him?’

She closed her eyes as she pieced it together. Even though she didn't think it possible, a tiny smile played at the corner of her mouth. 'You put a GPS tracker in his glasses.'

'Genius, no? Now, no one can accuse you of being slow in the mornings,' then, he whispered, more to himself, 'or night?'

She wasn't really listening any more. Instead, her eyes trailed back to where she had come from.

She couldn't see the compound anymore. Nothing but sand and dust.

Swallowing, she murmured, 'He's not there.'

'Oh, wow, I didn't know that,' Tony muttered, not realizing the comment hadn't been meant for him. 'I only have a GPS tracker telling me he's not but, you know, whatever.'

This time, she could hear what she didn't before. Maybe because this time, she was actually listening.

Tony was worried.

'This wasn't part of a plan?' Tony continued on.

'No.'

'Get ready for déjà vu, Red, but now I need *you* to be a bit more specific. What the hell's he doing skipping off into the desert at two o'clock,' a few more mumbles, 'in the morning?'

'Send me the coordinates.'

There was another pause. 'What are you going to do? Go find him?'

The ever-present sarcastic edge was there but it didn't hide the concern as well as he thought.

'Yes,' she said.

Again, silence. Then, 'Thank you.'

She closed her eyes. There was nothing to thank her for. If what she thought was happening was correct, then chances were that they were going to hate her, just a little bit.

Still though, she couldn't say that without tipping him off and either giving him a reason to oust her or worse, implicating him in something he had no part in. Because, while Tony was a lot of things and had broken a lot of rules, he hadn't outright sided with a renowned terrorist group before.

'Yeah,' was all she could say.

As she heard some clicking on the other side, Tony asked, as though absent-mindedly, ‘So... how you been?’

She snorted but her smile felt more natural; she was grateful to him for that. ‘You’re kidding me, right? You’ve rung me in the middle of the night—’

‘Early day.’

‘—don’t start that again, to just have an easy chat?’

‘You don’t do small talk too well, do you, Red?’

She could hear Clint in the background exclaim, ‘Better than having a constant nattering.’

‘No one asked you, Robin Hood.’ Tony’s voice lowered, fake-whispering into the phone. ‘I’m starting to wish he actually would garrotte me in my sleep.’

Natasha bit her lip at hearing Clint’s voice but kept on going on. ‘Always nice talking to you, Tony.’

‘You too, Red. Coordinates are sent through. I’ve got to run, Red, but tell Grinchy I said hi.’

The dial-tone sounded in her ear before going dead.

‘Bye, Stark,’ she muttered before adding, ‘Bye, Clint.’

Then, she checked the coordinates Tony sent through. It looked to be in a place vaguely familiar off to the east of the compound.

She looked towards the dark and turned her motorbike back around. Then, she gunned it.

When the outlines of the ant-hills stood against the sky, she began to slow. Sure enough, there he sat in the shadow of them again, even though the only thing he had to hide from now was moonlight.

She cut the motor and the deadness of the night was startling. Even in the remote areas she had been to, she didn’t think she’d heard a place quite like this, without even the sound of wildlife or rustling of trees somewhere.

They looked at each other.

‘Long way from home,’ she said.

Bruce smiled. ‘Home is an interesting term.’

She shrugged; she had to agree with him there.

‘So,’ he said, ‘what’s the plan?’

She snorted. ‘Plan.’

She'd had a lot of plans at Gimmelwald. They melded with wishes at times but she knew what she wanted. Get back into the agent game and do something of worth. Erase red. Rinse. Repeat.

‘Are we winging it then?’

She raised an eyebrow. ‘We?’

Standing, he swung his duffle onto his shoulder. ‘We,’ he reaffirmed.

‘Why?’

Bruce didn't pretend he didn't understand her question. ‘Last time I checked, we were trying out this whole team thing.’

‘You realize this is treason, right? Last time *I* checked, that wasn't covered in the contract.’

He didn't look at her, fiddling with the sleeves of his sweater. ‘And the last time I checked, I didn't think you needed a contract to be friends.’

She didn't have a retort. Bruce had shook her world again, caught her off-guard. Never had she been so happy about that.

Before she could respond, he pushed on, smirking. ‘And it isn't treason if we aren't caught.’

Never did she think Bruce would have this amount of larceny in him though technically, she really should have.

‘I have to talk to that woman,’ she said. ‘I have to. How it ends,’ the truth of it scared her but wouldn't stop her, ‘I don't know.’

‘So we could return the heroes,’ he said, hopping on the bike he had brought, ‘or the villains.’

It was only then she realized she no longer cared about being considered the villain.

‘I've had experience at both,’ she said.

‘So have I.’ He leaned back and indicated to her with a wave of his hand. ‘So, I ask again... what now?’

‘What now?’ She kicked her motorbike to life. ‘Now, we ride.’

Desiree felt it before she heard anything.

‘Weapons down,’ she commanded.

With hesitancy, Deborah obeyed.

Desiree stared into the darkness until she could see the form of a man walking towards her.

Immediately, Deborah raised her rifle despite the man's hands being up.

A low, rough chuckle echoed over the dunes. 'I wouldn't do that if I were you.'

Desiree watched as he came more into the light. The growing beard threw her off for a second but she remembered pictures of him all across the home she had been kept in. Then later on, when she used to look at these photos of heroes in America, she wondered when they were going to save her.

A low gasp let her know Deborah knew him as well. She still didn't put the rifle away.

'Weapons down,' Desiree growled. 'Now. Or do you want to rumble with the Hulk?'

The man... Banner... shuddered but other than that, didn't do anything more. Desiree watched him with wary eyes. So much so, she didn't see the shadow flicker to her right until it was next to her.

Swinging around, placing herself in front of Deborah, she came to face the woman with the red hair. The one who had let her and Robin go. Natasha.

Natasha, in the same maddeningly calming voice as before, said, 'I see you have a new friend. She looks a bit like one of the missing soldiers.'

Desiree's fear left. 'My old friend is dead,' she spat.

The Glock in the woman's hand was steady but Desiree swore something changed in the woman's face.

Natasha glanced over at Banner. 'That was a stupid move. Next time, follow my plan.'

'You said you didn't have a plan.'

Desiree turned from him to her. 'I don't know how you got here... how you found me... but my answer is the same as the last time. I'll die before I give up those children.'

Natasha didn't respond and instead, asked, 'What are you doing out here?'

Before Desiree could reply, Deborah jumped in.

'She is innocent,' she hissed.

‘Shut up!’ Desiree snapped, tempted to cuff her along the temple to sell the act further.

But Deborah had already stepped away from her, coming towards them, weapon at her side. So different from the woman she had met those months before.

‘She is not a terrorist!’ she said, getting more amped up the more she talked. The two intruders’ expressions were indecipherable but Deborah kept on. ‘There is a war and she is on the wrong side of it. The only thing she and the others have ever done has been in defence of their kids.’ Deborah stuck out her chin. ‘And I don’t care if I get labelled as some traitor or crazy. I’m telling that truth.’ She looked back at Desiree. ‘I’m fighting for you. One way or another.’

No one outside of Desiree’s people had ever fought for her. Sure, there had been the odd soldier or home attendant who would give her some extra food or a toy, but nothing which would put themselves out, let alone, put a target on their back.

Desiree’s eyes shot to Natasha. The woman’s green eyes found hers as well and they held.

There were no ethereal hands reaching out to her but Desiree could still feel the hurt, the confusion, from her. She was in pain but not close to death

It was similar to what Desiree had learnt after being with Deborah after a long time.

This was no enemy.

As though to prove her thoughts right, the Glock lowered and the two groups looked across at each other, unsure where to move. Desiree was under no illusion that this meant they were no longer in danger. She and Deborah could be taken out within seconds if the two decided to turn on them.

‘Are you here to help us?’ Desiree asked softly. ‘Or to capture us?’

Natasha raised her eyebrow. ‘You have until the morning to help me decide which it will be.’

Desiree smiled. ‘I don’t need to. You’ve already decided.’

Interlude 16

There was a beginning. I wasn't alive when it happened. I'd heard stories of prosperity and peace but I'm not sure if they are dreams shrouded in nostalgia or the truth. It's hard to believe there can be anything better than the life I had, my parents, my grandparents and even my great grandparents. Still though, the stories live on, passed on from generation to generation, packages of hope that can't be stolen.

You don't realize you are different to begin with. You enjoy digging your toes into the dirt like all children; you like the cool pockets you discover the deeper you swim in a water hole; most of all though, you love the forehead kisses from your mother as you curl in bed at night.

However, when you watch, hidden in the folds of your mother's clothes, the children disappearing around you into the calloused hands of blue and green clad people, you start to realize that it is going to be harder for you to hide away. Harder for you to hold onto your mother; harder for you to step towards a future that is brighter; harder to live.

Things were getting better. We all had to admit that. Didn't we? Where our people had more rights to come into the city, able to have jobs, get paid. There were the times where we disappeared into cells and only emerged, cold and with red marks around our necks, but they weren't talked about, whispers between each other that were never written down so they couldn't be true.

We'll have to move one day, my mother used to say to me. There's more hope in the city.

I was taken there without her. It was one of those days where when you look back, you realize how special it was. Mama woke me up with a forehead kiss, she packed my favourite sandwich to have at my little local school and stood waving on the porch, showing her teeth in a big smile, something she only ever did with me.

Through the days of loneliness and nights of nightmares, I searched for the hope and finally, after years, followed that thread back to home.

Though, that was when I realized that a place didn't make a home; a person did. And with that person no longer there, I no longer had a home.

I was told that my being taken was a mistake. That it wouldn't happen again. That it was done with the best of intentions which would be better realized next time.

The mistake kept happening though, until, you finally have to face facts.

It is no longer a mistake; it is an action.

I'd heard that desperate times call for desperate measures. I never realized what desperate was until I saw what Dean was willing to do for his wife and son. Robin and Daniel. To think he was labelled as a predator by those that wouldn't have even known his middle name, let alone his heart.

Through all the lies and accusations, we found what we were all willing to do to keep the next generation from going through the hell the one did before. And before that. And before that.

It's always strange to hear someone say that something is so beyond contemptible that they won't even think of their child going through it. Then, you realize that you did go through that unspeakable, contemptible thing. Then, you start to understand the hurt burning within you, burning under your skin until it bubbles.

I don't know how long I held the talent to help people go to sleep peacefully. I remember one girl in the homes. They said she was dying from pneumonia but I knew differently. I crawled into bed with her as she called for her papa, asking when he was coming back to get her. I stroked her face, hair, kissed her forehead, but nothing seemed to calm her. Then, I held her cheeks as I willed her to feel some form of peace with the cries rattling her chest.

She went still. Quiet, smiling and watching like she could finally see the happiness and hope I was searching for frantically.

Meanwhile, I was crying with the overwhelming feeling of loneliness engulfing me. It took me almost until morning to realize that she was dead and smiling empty at the wall.

Maybe I was born with it. I'd never been with someone as they died before then.

Unfortunately, I became familiar with it when I travelled to Northern Hopes, following my broken string all the way back to Robin. I had unwittingly used my talents three times before then. However, Dean was the first person I purposefully used it on.

Robin had been angry with me for a while. I think because her soul mate died in my arms and not hers. That I was the one to give him comfort and she couldn't give him what I could.

Robin never did helpless well. People started to see me as the leader of the revolt to protect our children from being stolen but it was Robin. It was always Robin who inspired me to move, to act, to protect.

The whispers of a secret war against us became more real. I didn't see it. So many others didn't either. We still knew we had to fight though.

Nhuungku was never an organised movement. If it had all been left up to Robin, perhaps it would have been. Or she would have gotten herself killed going down in flames within the first week if it meant keeping the rest of us out of the firing line.

Let's face it. We were no soldiers. We were mothers, sisters, friends which became family. We were also fighters, in whatever sense of the word that it meant to us.

We had been in hiding for a while, accumulating things here and there, bringing stolen food and medicine to some of the more outback settlements which weren't getting the supplies they needed. We are under attack, our 'protectors' said, we can't always get the supplies through. They never did, long before our group ever came along. We had a few children with us, from the mothers who fled with their kids in their arms, which is what formed our motley crew in the first place. We felt somewhat safe, hidden, unsure of our next move. Unsure what our role even was in this rapidly changing world that we wished would leave us alone.

We heard over the radio they were coming for a mass stealing of children to the village of Sierra. We didn't really think what the retaliation would be that day. All we did was move.

And that day, we did move like soldiers. It was the first time I realized just how much we had all changed, to suit with the silent war.

It's no longer silent. We hear the screams at night, in the day, a wrestle for power, for control, that we didn't lay down and give up.

This is not a fight I can win in pure firepower. I've known that for a long time and it was something Robin, rest her soul, could never understand, why we could not scrimp, save, bleed and bite to edge that bit further ahead to eventually win. That's

not how it will work and we will be found, soulless and half dead, before that ever has a chance of eventuating.

This is my last stand. All I can hope is that I can make it a little better for the few closest to me. Make them have a better life before they inevitably die as well.

At the moment, that is all I can hope for. May you not need my talents to make your death a peaceful one.

Chapter 19

Natasha had been fed many stories throughout her life. Ones which haunted her, others which grated on her skin and ones which rang full of lies. The Indigenous woman's story before her was full of sadness and resignation.

'So you were going to just give yourself in?' Bruce asked, watching this Desiree woman with enough understanding to bespoke experience.

Desiree shrugged. 'A distraction.' She nodded to the white woman, whose skin looked like she hadn't seen sunlight for months, which was ironic in a land like this. 'She was going to help in that. The army would have found something then. It would stop them looking, even just for a small amount of time.'

Obviously, there was a connection between these two women that Natasha could imagine didn't go down too well with the rest of the group. This missing soldier... Deborah... was the embodiment of their continual oppressor.

Natasha could relate to that feeling and doubted she would have been as welcoming as this Desiree seemed to be. In fact, it weirded her out the way Desiree would watch Natasha herself, like the woman could feel her pain and more than that, understand it.

Understand the way she was unable to find a place in the world where she could make up for the wrong she had done in it. If she thought about it too long, she would get the dizzying feeling of falling, falling, falling, and fearing when and where she was going to hit the ground.

Suddenly, everything got to her, the soft, drained looks of all those around her. It was the feeling she had in Gimmelwald the longer she sat still, the smidgeon of what she felt in the meeting with the team, that thing of giving up, giving *in* as though she would never be able to reach where she needed to. It was also the feeling she had not a few hours before and she realized how much she had given into it then.

No. No, *no*, NO.

'That's your plan?' It was sharper than she intended but she didn't have the willpower to step around the subject.

'I never thought I'd say this but,' Bruce cleared his throat, 'think you could be more subtle?'

Desiree smiled though, watching her with that same unnerving kindness. 'It isn't the first time I've had my plan disparaged.' The sadness became palpable. 'Believe me. But there has been no better one.'

Natasha refused to break eye contact. Refused to back down in any other way. Because that was part of who she was. She was a survivor and wasn't going to give in or accept.

'Until now,' she answered.

Wariness came over Desiree, a soft tilt of the head as she considered Natasha with distrust.

'I'm not going to ask you to trust me,' Natasha said. 'It would be stupid for you to. But you only have two options. One: keep to your current plan which you know is just a Band-Aid. No one is going to be saved and you know as well as I do that the army is going to come for those kids one way or another, no matter how much you keep hiding them.'

Beside her, Bruce looked into the distance. She wished she could see his face even though that probably wouldn't give her a better reading on what he was thinking.

Desiree didn't give anything away, letting Natasha know that she didn't have plans to hide those kids away.

'Option two: if you follow me and I lied to you, those kids are found sooner than later. If I'm telling you the truth then I'll get your children somewhere they can claim asylum.' When Bruce glanced at her, she swallowed and amended, 'Or at least try.'

Desiree didn't say a word, intense gaze burrowing into her, and Natasha didn't back down once. It was another stare-off, more loaded than before.

Finally, Desiree inclined her head to Natasha. 'Fine,' she whispered. 'I'll trust you.'

'You don't have to. Just follow.'

Desiree smiled with no humour. 'I'm good at multi-tasking.'

Natasha didn't know whether to feel flattered or sick.

Interlude 17

I remember practicing with the rifles Robin, Sonya and I stole from a broken-down convoy. We set up cans on a bough of a gumtree half-submerged in red dirt. Each burst of power from the gun vibrated through my hands and it made me feel a flush of warmth and sick in one.

Daniel wanted to try but we wouldn't let him. Maya was hurt that we practiced, yet she followed along behind me, saying, 'I'm staying with you, my girl, after all this time of finally getting to see you again.'

At times, I wished she wouldn't. Because when I would see her face as we came back with more childless strays, I didn't need more guilt.

I didn't really know guilt though until we moved on Sierra. We thought we would be in and out before any soldiers came, saving the mothers and fathers from the fate so many of us had suffered. We weren't fast enough though.

We weren't soldiers; we fought like them though, using our knowledge of the land and camouflage to take them down one by one. The few men who were there, the ones who hadn't left to try to make some money in an attempt to move their family to the city, took up arms with us.

They lived and died with us that day and I helped a lot of souls go to sleep.

As we gathered the children, I found one of the Alia Surat soldiers gasping near a humpy. A bullet had got him in the stomach. Not enough for a fast death but a death sentence nonetheless.

He had stared at me, trying not to cry with the pain, thinking that would make him braver. The quintessential fearless soldier as he died.

No one else was around so I knelt beside him and after listening to his painful breaths, finally placed my hands on his cheeks. His eyes filled with terror before he started to feel the calmness that I gave.

In turn, I felt his utter confusion. I didn't feel hatred or rage. I watched as eventually, he smiled at me, as everyone did, that soft, grateful smile which always turned into the ghoulish empty one as they died in my arms.

As I turned to leave, Robin stood behind me. She had never looked so disgusted.

'You think they deserve a peaceful death after the hell they make our living years into?' she said and I knew she was thinking of Dean, dear sweet Dean, as he was blown away by trying to get between his son and the officer attempting to snatch him up.

'I don't know,' I said helplessly.

There was so much anger, pain and sadness that half of the time, I didn't know where we were heading or what the point to it all was.

Robin always seemed to know though as she jerked her head for me to follow. She never gave away my secret and I never volunteered it.

I tried to do it one more time after that. On one of my walks, I found a soldier who had been obviously searching for us. It looked like a snake had bitten him and he'd lost his communication device. He laid on the sandy floor, frothing at the mouth, literally choking to death.

I didn't hesitate that time, rushing to put my hands on him, let him die believing he could actually breathe easy.

Immediately, he tried to wrench out of my grasp, hissing hateful words that I refuse to write down.

For a moment, I felt his emotions and they knocked me, leaving me gasping next to him. The hatred was crippling; if he had a gun, he would gore me with it and laugh while doing so. It was a hatred which went deep, feeling like it was ingrained in his DNA so he couldn't let it go, even as he died.

I watched as he screamed, gasped and gurgled his way to death. Even if he would have allowed me to touch him, I knew I couldn't have brought peace to that sort of hatred. But, I could at least keep him company.

He probably would have preferred to die by himself rather than have the likes of me sitting next to him. Robin didn't think I had enough anger in me but I did that day, as I refused to leave that man, taunting him as he died just with my presence even though I didn't say a word.

It was a horrible thing to do; he was a horrible man. The thought didn't make me feel better afterwards as I remembered him spitting at me, shouting at me to leave, when he had the breath.

I refused to move though.

When he died, nails filled with red dirt by scraping them along the ground in his pain, I took his gun, satchel and searched him for verification. I found his name

was Charles Lewis and he was a private. He probably thought he was going to rise to general if he went out and single-handedly took down the Nhuungku terrorist group.

Probably thought we were nothing but a bunch of dumb blacks, which was one of the slurs he had shouted at me as he lay dying. That was one which still sticks with me. Out of all the cruel and horrible things I've been called, that I've seen, and that's the one which still hurts when I think about it.

I think, because of its simplicity. Like I can be summed up in two plain words, one that summarises my intelligence, my history, my culture and another that labels me as nothing more than a solitary colour. What about my eyes? My hair? My blood? Yet, all I am is black.

I found a picture of a child in his breast pocket. I refused to look at it but instead, wrapped his limp and swollen fingers around it as I crossed his hands over his chest.

I thought about burying him but he probably would have hated the thought of being put to rest by me more than not being put to rest.

So, this time, I didn't do it out of spite but left him as he was, soon to be dismembered by the dingoes and eyes plucked by the crows. Though, they mightn't touch him for a good while, sensing the poison in his system. In that case, he would first swell then shrivel in the sun until he was down to bones. Still, the smell of death would permeate the area for a while.

It always did.

Chapter 20

‘There’s a hole in your plan.’

Bruce said it like he was commenting on the weather as they rode, side-by-side, on their motorbikes.

She screeched to a halt and he bumbled to a stop a few feet from her, almost stacking it a few times.

‘Come again?’

‘Well...’ he scratched at his growing beard, ‘if you want to do this and still go back home.’

Home. There was that word again. Still though, it brought thoughts of Clint, of Lila and Cooper, and suddenly, she realized how much she wanted to accomplish this without going on the U.S.A’s most wanted list.

Again.

‘They’re not going to just let you drive an aircraft through their airspace without some questions,’ he smiled wryly at her, ‘or some confusion.’

‘I’m listening.’

He breathed through his nose, as though exasperated he had to talk more, before indicating to the expanse of bush. ‘Care to point me to the most desolated area out here?’

It took her that second more to click. ‘You’re kidding me.’

‘The army want something to chase. Let’s give them something to chase. I don’t even have to turn. Just tell them I have. That’ll get them sending every known weapon out here and give you some wriggle room.’

She flashed back to the soldier with the gun who shot at Bruce. It didn’t take a genius to know that whether Bruce transformed or not, he would most likely be pushed to it with how gung-ho every soldier appeared to be around the man who contained the Hulk.

Still though, she wasn’t a sentimental person. She could see what had to and needed to be done.

‘Okay,’ she said, logging into her GPS and locating the furthest location from all villages. Also, a decent way away from the meeting point they had planned. But not too far so one probably wouldn’t notice a stray aircraft or not.

She sent him the coordinates. ‘Got it?’

He grabbed his mobile. ‘Got it.’

Before he left though, she reached over and, against all senses, patted him on his back. He looked as terrified as she felt.

‘Good luck,’ she said and he nodded slowly back at her.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘You too.’

Then, he turned his motorbike and disappeared into a cloud of dust. She could still hear the roar long after she couldn’t see him.

Now, all she could do was wait.

As she sat there, the first rays of sunlight began to break through the sky, streaking the ground with different colours of red, like a flickering fire across the dirt. This time, she had nowhere to hide and could only sit there, in the middle of the shimmering reds, waiting for the moment she had to move.

Desiree didn’t slow down to keep pace with Deborah, sprinting through the desert. In the back of her mind, she could feel the heat, the sweat dripping down her curls and slipping down her back but she kept on.

‘Desiree,’ Deborah gasped from behind her and begrudgingly, Desiree realized she had to slow, even if for a little while.

‘Come on.’ Desiree waved her on. ‘We have a time frame.’

Deborah’s white face was bright red with the strain but hearing that, she kept up somewhat of a jog. Even if it was sub-par to what Desiree or any of the other people in her group could do.

Still though, Desiree didn’t comment and returned to running. Trying her hardest not to let her hope rise up and blind her.

This depended on more than the people she had made the deal with and that scared her.

But, it had come to this.

The last stand.

As Bruce cut the motorbike, the silence of the land was deafening. He shuddered.

It brought him somewhat back to his solitary trek in the snow but at least there, it was the crunch-crunch underneath his feet, the heaviness of his breath, the wind in his ears. He almost missed the dust storms, if only for some sound.

Taking a few deep breaths, he centred himself. That small part of him still wondered if the army had finally found the thing to destroy him. If they were to try something, Alia Surat would be the place to do it with its isolation.

It wouldn't be bad... to go out like this. Feeling like he was okay. That he had done a few things right.

What was weird though was that he didn't want to. Not yet anyway.

So, here was actually hoping that they couldn't kill him.

Funny how his wishes changed.

He didn't see it as such a bad thing.

In the distance, there were a few old tin shacks barely standing, obviously abandoned from what looked like a bombing having gone wrong. There was debris and black burnt in the ground even though it looked like it had happened a long time ago.

At least he would have some shade. And flimsy protection from the bullets that would inevitably start flying.

It was the little things that counted.

Pressing in a familiar number, he pushed the bike's kickstand down, cursed as he stubbed his toe then began to walk towards the old shelters.

After the twenty-second ring (he never could stop himself from counting things like that, or objects like the tires on cars or trucks even though the answer was usually the same, statistically speaking), he was finally answered.

'Do you even realize what time it is?'

'It's four-thirty in the morning here,' he said cheerfully.

'That's obscene. It's *dark* here. Therefore, I'm declaring it night time. Don't care of the logistics. Night.' There were a few seconds of silence. 'So... how're you doing, big man?'

Bruce smiled and it felt easier than it had in awhile. ‘Strangely, not too bad.’

‘That is strange,’ Tony rejoined, always sharp even when half asleep.

‘Tell me. How secure is this line?’

‘Did you ring up to insult me or actually ask me something you don’t know?’

‘Fair enough. How busy are your lawyers?’

Tony didn’t even pause at the random question, saying, ‘Well, between making sure I don’t get continually sued with public damage and keeping certain S.H.I.E.L.D. agents from doing time, probably sipping piña coladas and singing “Brown-eyed Girl” at karaoke dive bars. Why do you ask?’

‘Thought they might be getting tired of singing “Brown-eyed Girl”.’

This time, there was a note of seriousness in Tony’s voice. ‘Anything I should be aware of, Shrek?’

Taking a deep breath, Bruce let out the truth, hoping Tony would see it the same way he and Natasha did. And if Tony didn’t, hopefully he trusted them enough to take their word for it.

Usually, he wasn’t superstitious; but he did cross his fingers that the one time he decided to trust, it wasn’t the moment he would be let down the worst.

Irony always did have it out for him.

Interlude 18

Desiree watched as the sun crept over the horizon. She looked to her left to see Sonya, holding Mandy in her arms, since his leg was still too painful to walk. Marissa stood close by, refusing to let her brother out of her sight.

All around her, women and children stood, with a man peppered here and there. Some were propped on others, the slightly healthier helping hold another up.

There were thirty-two in total with the new arrivals from the bombing. The back of her mind knew it should have been thirty-three but there was nothing she could do about that now.

She could only move forward; no more looking back.

Deborah was to her right, looking to her for a signal.

Gripping Daniel's hand tighter, she managed to give him a smile before nodding.

As one, they all started to move into the sun.

Chapter 21

The compound was alive as Natasha approached. The guard let her in without even a second thought when she gave him her clearance number. She came into a yard with quadrants of soldiers doing drills, privates running folders and pilots getting some helicopters ready. She could smell fuel and dust while it was hotter than usual. It felt like the ground was vibrating with the movement.

She grabbed a random private's arm and asked, 'Where's Sussler?'

He stared at her before snorting, 'Darlin', he doesn't take in any stray,' before walking off.

Gritting her teeth, she stopped herself from snapping his arm and stood, watching all these soldiers running by her like she didn't even exist.

Well, didn't exist in the way that they saw her.

Fine then. Two could play this game.

Taking one breath, then another, she swallowed. Then, promptly began to scream hysterically.

'Please! Please, someone, you've got to help me! Sussler, Sussler!'

Almost instantaneously, she had people running to her, asking what was wrong, what could they do, who had hurt her, then repeating what could they do?

She gasped pitifully as she grasped onto one of the numerous arms offered to her.

Soon, Sussler was in front of her, crouching down like they somehow weren't the same height or something.

'Natasha! What happened?'

'Banner,' she said and when enough soldiers glanced at her weirdly, she added, 'Hulk.'

Now *that* got the reaction she needed but not so much wanted, most immediately reaching for their weapons. Sussler stared at her in horror.

'What about him?'

'We were out...' she gulped and gasped again, 'we were out searching and, and, oh, god, I don't know what happened, what startled him but, but, he's out... out.' She waved her hands to the west.

The sad thing was, she didn't have to be more explicit than that. A combination of being a hysterical woman and the mention of the Hulk had every soldier jumping in to be the hero and Sussler looking stoically into the west, proclaiming, 'Man your vehicles! All soldiers that were to search Ludmira change course!'

'Keep your distance from him and don't engage!' Natasha was quick to call. 'I'll do the talking to him.'

Sussler gave a wave to indicate he heard her but didn't look back.

It was almost too easy. Which immediately made her on guard as she allowed some guys to lean her against a wall, offering her water.

'Thank you,' she whispered. 'I'll head out in the Quinjet as soon as I can. I just need...'

She waved her hand vaguely around her head.

A soldier patted her on the arm. 'You just take your time, darlin',' he said without taking in what she said. He sat down beside her, seeming to take it upon himself that he was now her personal babysitter.

Sussler glanced at her and she pretended not to notice. Then, he jogged back towards the main hangar, shouting orders the whole way. It was when he said, 'Try to lock onto any gamma radiation signal,' she knew they weren't going to get through this unscathed.

She watched with a sinking heart as the helicopters, manned with gunners, lifted into the air. Then, she could hear as two jets started up as well and could imagine as they started to roll on to the runway she had glimpsed when she and Bruce landed before.

Everyone was moving, ready for the fight before it even happened.

'Water,' she said to the soldier staying with her. 'P-Please.'

He patted her arm. 'Don't you worry, darlin'. We'll have it all sorted soon.'

As he took off, she muttered, 'Well, let's hope so.'

Then, she stood and navigated her way around all the running bodies without breaking a sweat.

The blast of air coming out of the Quinjet was hot and stuffy. It felt natural for her fingers to run over the buttons and she put on the headset.

'Stark's Quinjet, requesting lift-off,' she said, breathing in the cold air con as she started the engine.

There was a crackle. 'Business?'

'Corralling the Hulk.'

Not a moment later, she received, 'Cleared.'

She loved the feeling of lift-off, like she could feel her very feet flying off the ground, safe and far away from everything and everyone.

When she was a good few miles out, with a small amount of hesitation, she clicked the flashing light on the control panel.

As soon as she did, the smooth tones came through the speakers. 'Miss me, Agent Romanoff?'

She smirked. 'You were polite this time. You actually waited for me to answer rather than hacking through.'

'What can I say? Even I can still learn.'

For once, she found it hard to get the right words until she simply said, 'Thanks for this.'

'What are friends for if not to commit secret treason with?'

'Well, when you put it that way.'

She softly chuckled at his retaliation. 'You sure you can pilot this remotely?'

'I'm bordering on being insulted.'

'Fine.' She turned on stealth mode. She took comfort in the invisibility this time. 'Ready?'

'I'm always ready.'

She took another deep breath. 'So am I.'

Bruce could hear the sound of the helicopters before he could see them. Inside him, he felt a rumble and his skin prickled.

'Steady,' he murmured. 'Steady.'

When the growing cacophony of machinery grew, he felt his grip on his sanity oozing away.

'It's okay,' he said again but even he didn't believe it.

He should have learnt to be a better liar.

Interlude 19

Desiree watched as a part of the sky broke away, shimmering and moving towards her. The dust stirred and like a wave, the sky flipped over to reveal a type of aircraft lowering to the ground, thrumming vibrating through the ground and up into her feet.

Daniel ducked behind her and Sonya aimed her rifle. Desiree held up her hand though, waiting and watching. Hesitantly, Sonya lowered the gun.

As the dust settled, the hatchback opened. Natasha appeared.

No one else came; it was just her.

It felt too good to be true because deep down, Desiree knew it was. Still though, she had to keep on pushing. Keep on hoping that this would be the one time that everything would work out for the best.

Natasha's eyes swept over all of them before settling on her. 'All here?' she asked.

Desiree looked to Sonya. Sonya nodded back and Desiree stepped forward, away from the group, her family, and walked to Natasha.

She could see Natasha was visibly searching her for a weapon. Again, Desiree had to admire her but simultaneously, felt that same wariness that they had both made a mistake and someone was going to suffer from this exchange.

Namely, the children in her care.

Or the ones that would be in her care for the next few minutes.

'Yes,' she said. 'All here, but not all coming.'

Natasha watched her expressionlessly but Desiree could see the concern there straight away. For who, she didn't know but it made her feel a tad more comfortable about their uneasy alliance.

'Who's boarding?' Natasha asked.

'The children.' Desiree gestured behind her. 'And Deborah.'

Desiree could see the battle on Natasha's face; where she thought she could fix everything, save everyone.

'We have good lawyers,' she said.

'I would prefer all of their concentration to be on the children. Not on us.' She glanced one more time at the children, 'We just want them to have freedom to be

themselves and carry on our legacy. Even if it means we can't be in the picture for now. Maybe we can come when the world no longer sees us as the terrorists.'

Though, deep down, Desiree couldn't ever see that happening, that her people, her culture, wouldn't be seen as a threat to Alia Surat's new way of life. But she couldn't admit that to herself now. Probably never could.

When Natasha didn't move, Desiree smiled softly. 'You cannot save everyone.'

'I can try.'

'Then you will fail. Because the world is not yours to save.'

A flash of understanding flickered across Natasha's face. With great difficulty, she stepped to the side and jerked her head to the open hatchback.

'All aboard then,' she said, waving the rest of them forward.

None moved until Desiree gave the signal and a tiny smirk played across Natasha's lips when she saw this.

She wished the departure could have been full of loving goodbyes, melancholy but having a satisfaction in the knowledge that it was the right thing to do.

It couldn't be though.

To kiss each child goodbye as they clung onto her, crying, begging her to come, terrified of what was in the future, would haunt her until the day she closed her eyes for good. Little hands reached out to her and she stopped herself from reaching back, from making it harder. On them and herself.

Finally, she got to Daniel and crouched down in front of him. 'You've got this.'

'You sure this is the right thing to do?' he whispered to her and she couldn't lie to him.

'No,' she said, 'but I think it's the best option we have left.'

He didn't have to say he hoped she was right. Instead, he squeezed her around the waist before taking a deep breath and walking towards the aircraft without looking back. Like his mother would have done, like some sort of soldier in the making. It scared her that she was relieved to see that in a child.

She turned to Deborah. The white women's eyes searched her own for something Desiree was sure she wouldn't find.

'Will you survive?' she finally asked.

Desiree didn't want to survive; she wanted to live. But that was something which wasn't for her. Or Sonya. Or had been for Robin. It was a chance for the children though.

All she could say was, 'Who knows what the future will bring?'

Slowly, Deborah held out her hand. 'Good luck, Desiree.'

Watching the hand, remembering all the ones reaching out of the ground, crevices, bars and past visions, Desiree hesitantly took it before pulling Deborah into a hug.

'Remember my stories,' she whispered.

Then, she let go.

Unlike Daniel, Deborah kept glancing back before the darkness of the aircraft enveloped her. Natasha looked to her once more, as though waiting for her to change her mind.

Then, Natasha turned and closed the hatchback. The last thing Desiree saw was a glimpse of her red hair.

In a puff of dust, the aircraft's grey exterior folded over, like the sun flipping inside out, shimmering until it resembled the landscape. Desiree could still feel its hum, the breeze blowing the red dirt into her face as it lifted up and moved further and further away. Though, she still swore she could feel the vibration of it through her feet and fingertips, thrumming into her heart.

Sonya stepped beside her and slipped her hand into Desiree's.

Desiree squeezed back. 'Shall we?' she asked.

Sonya didn't do the retort of *We shall*. Instead, she nodded and together, they began to run further into the desert, waiting for the moment that they would become lost but more hopefully, forgotten.

I never believed I was going to have a happy ending. I may be naïve in many things but I'm not stupid. I don't even believe that the next generation of my people like Daniel will either. He will probably fight and fight until he loses something of himself along the way and wonders why he is fighting at all.

However, I have faith that there may be a happy ending for the generation after the next after the next. That somewhere in the future, an Indigenous child will live and breathe with the same rights as the people who occupy the same land as him or her or them.

So, that is why I will continue to survive, stumbling towards an ending where I might hopefully have someone to hold my hand and bring me the comfort I'll need as I die.

In hopes, that Daniel's grandchildren won't need people like me to make their deaths peaceful.

Chapter 22

The trees with the bloated middles whizzed by as the hot air beat down on Natasha. She was no longer protected in the Quinjet, back on her motorbike in the harshness of the never-ending desert with its dirt and heat. She could no longer hear the Quinjet. The distance ahead of her was hazy like a mirage waiting to happen. By Natasha's coordinates, she should be approaching some old structures soon.

Natasha didn't tend to do things off-the-cuff. There was usually *some* planning. So, leaving the Quinjet in Tony's virtual hands and flying through the desert on her motorbike was against her usual *modus operandi*.

Still, she drove. She drove until she could hear pained roars and gunfire.

Bruce went against his instincts to hide as he heard the machinery draw closer. Then, the voice came over the megaphone, telling him to come out with his hands up.

He did so with an embarrassed grin on his face, squinting in the unforgiving sunlight. Sweat slipped down his back. For once, it wasn't to do with the heat but with the familiar whop-whop-whop of the helicopters and army green trucks standing out, ugly against the red landscape.

A soldier lifted a megaphone and the voice rang with an American accent gone slightly wrong, with an open vowel sound that Alia Surat was known for.

'Hands up.'

He recognized Sussler.

'Hands are up,' Bruce called back.

He realized a second later how deep his voice was. Strength pulsed in his veins, pumping them up, making him feel bigger and bigger even though he wasn't growing.

'I'm not changing, I'm not,' he called out, but his voice grew deeper as the helicopters came closer with their whop-whop-whop.

That was the only sound in his head when the first bullet fired.

Natasha skidded her bike to a halt at the perimeter of vehicles. Soldiers were ducking behind the trucks, as bullets rang out and shards of glass and metal exploded around them. The heat grew in waves of gunfire.

Another roar rang out, which sounded like a scream to her ears this time.

‘Code green,’ a soldier shouted into a walkie-talkie. ‘It’s a code green damn it!’

She could envision a sky full of bullets if she didn’t move and move soon.

‘What did you do?’ she snapped at the soldier but he didn’t reply.

‘Weapons down!’ she ordered. ‘Pass it along, tell them Natasha Romanoff will take this situation in hand. But I need weapons down.’

‘That won’t be happening.’

She spun around to see Sussler jumping off a truck next to her, surrounded by his own swarm of soldiers.

‘I beg your pardon?’ she hissed.

‘The Hulk is out of control,’ he said. ‘We will pacify him and take him in hand.’

‘I told you not to engage... I told you to keep your distance.’

He turned to her, raising an eyebrow and suddenly, she hated his face with everything she was worth.

‘In all due respect, *Agent Romanoff*,’ he said, ‘I don’t take orders from *you*.’

As he turned his back on her, she stopped herself from garrotting him.

When another roar rang out, she realized she had a higher priority than taking down Sussler.

One part of her wanted to run out into the fray; surely they couldn’t shoot her? But something told her they wouldn’t hold back. They were too scared and in their eyes, her death wouldn’t cause enough of a political wave to halt them.

If it was Tony Stark, they would have no choice but to stop. But not for Natasha Romanoff.

Before she could decide how to reach Bruce, a sound, like thunder, began to build up on the edges of the horizon.

Even the soldiers heard it over the fire. Sussler gave an order over his walkie-talkie. The hail of bullets fell quiet, leaving a high-pitched whining in the distance, somewhere in the remnants of the village that Natasha could see.

Again, the thunder broke out and rang out in an explosion that vibrated through the earth. Natasha slipped into a crouch.

Then, a figure flickered in and out of sight at the crest of a hill in the distance. She was clad in red, her hood pulled back, revealing wild black curls and dark skin.

‘Nhuungku!’ someone called. ‘We’re under attack from Nhuungku!’

Sussler’s eyes lit up and he grabbed his walkie-talkie again. ‘Air force! Follow and attack at will!’

Natasha froze as the figure disappeared as quickly as she appeared. With her, so did the thrum of the aircrafts.

Then, Natasha’s earpiece crackled. She paused, trying to make out if it was interference or if something was coming through the static.

‘Nata... come...’

She frowned. Cupping her hand around her ear, she turned away from the ruckus, ignoring the chaos.

‘Steve?’ she whispered.

‘Natash... coordinates?’

Grinning, she thumbed on her locator and waited.

Sure enough, one of the soldiers stationed with communication equipment at the back of a truck turned to Sussler.

‘Sir,’ he said. ‘We have an aircraft requesting approach. Right in the perimeter circle.’

Sussler looked wrecked, glancing back to the village remains and where Nhuungku had been. ‘A little busy here, Sergeant. Tell them if they approach, they do at their own risk.’

‘Sir,’ the sergeant swallowed. ‘Sir, it’s... it’s Captain America.’

Sussler spun around to stare at her. She didn’t break eye contact, daring him to make the next move.

Swallowing, he turned back to the sergeant. ‘Well, what’re you waiting for? Halt fire and tell him to come on in.’

He continued to watch Natasha but she didn’t care.

Within moments, the sky broke apart to reveal the Quinjet in mid-air, opening its hatchback and two people jumping out, landing on the ground in the perfect superhero stance.

Sussler's face paled and he growled over his walkie-talkie. 'Do not fire. Repeat, do not fire, whatever you do!'

Natasha brushed past him and the other frozen soldiers into the circle the perimeter had formed.

One of the figures ran towards the roaring while the other kept walking towards her.

'I've never been so grateful for the patriarchy,' she grinned.

Steve pulled off his cowl, blue eyes concerned, open and welcoming all in one. 'Thank you?' he said.

'Tony didn't think we could handle it?' she asked.

Steve shook his head. 'He thought you could use more back-up. You know,' he actually used his fingers to make quotation marks, "'as a team or something'."

Natasha raised an eyebrow at the movement.

'What?' Steve self-consciously lowered his hand. 'I was told that was modern.'

'For thirteen-year-olds,' she said before the angered roar made her eyes snap towards the flash of green and red she could now see smashing through metal and wood in the distance. 'What the hell is happening?'

'Thor's trying to contain the Hulk,' Steve said, head cocking in confusion. 'The usual protocol.'

'He doesn't need to be contained!' She went to push past him and run towards the fray.

Steve caught her by the arm. 'Natasha...' he didn't get a word out as Natasha turned back, holding up one finger.

'This is the only pass you will get for stopping me,' she hissed. 'Believe it or not, I know what I'm doing. Now, you can help me or not. But either way, I'm going in there and doing what I know has to be done.'

He stared at her before letting go of her arm. 'What do you need me to do?'

'Keep the trigger-happy soldiers at bay. I'll take care of the rest.'

'Done.'

She didn't wait to see if he would listen; instead, she ran until she reached the piles of debris, similar to the wreck left behind at Ludmira, but more broken down and sporadic. She ducked under corrugated iron sheets propped up against pieces of

wood and jumped over piles of rubbish. She did pause to pick up something on her way.

Until, finally, she skidded to a halt as a blonde-haired demigod flew past her, crashing down one of the few small houses still standing.

About fifty feet away, the Hulk smashed his fists into the ground, proclaiming his victory. Dark marks peppered his skin and he looked wilder than usual, slamming the ground again and again, causing red dirt to fly up everywhere and making her fight to keep her balance.

A sheet of iron was shoved to the side and Thor staggered out. 'Is that how you treat a work friend you have not seen in so long?' he shouted before he noticed Natasha. 'Natasha! Take cover quickly! It appears our good friend's mood is still sour, no matter what time of day.'

'I've got this, Thor!' she said, holding out a hand to him, sounding more confident than she was.

With a snarl, the Hulk's gaze found her. Something flickered under the anger.

No. Not anger. It took her a second to realize she had once again misread Bruce's moods.

It wasn't anger at all. It was hurt. And fear.

She also noted that the Hulk hadn't gone on a rampage, striking down any vehicle and soldier in his path. Instead, he had kept himself here, trying to hide from the attention, until directly confronted.

Which meant Bruce wasn't as far away as he may have been previous times.

The Hulk jerked as behind her, there was a crunch of glass.

'Don't move,' she commanded, not looking back.

'I do not believe—'

She held up her hand again. 'Don't... move.'

No one replied. She was going to take that as acceptance.

Slowly, the Hulk's eyes trailed back to her.

There was nothing quite like being caught in the behemoth's gaze. It was like having visible crosshairs on her. Never did she feel more like a hunted animal than at those moments. Like no matter how deep she would burrow, she would never be safe.

She shook off those thoughts. He watched her cautiously, sinking lower into a crouch, particularly when she reached for her Glock.

He was ready to spring.

But when she took it out of her holster, she dropped it on the ground. It fell with a dead thud.

‘No more fighting,’ she said, struggling for what to call him. This was the Hulk but it was Bruce too. ‘You’re safe, all right? I’m sorry I wasn’t here before but I am now and there’s going to be no more fighting.’

He huffed, as though she had said a joke and she had to understand him there. All the Hulk had ever felt towards him was fear, hurt and pain. Why wouldn’t he believe she was playing him?

It was like how she always used to feel. Hurt and pain followed her around until she learnt how to inflict it, better and deeper than anyone.

Just like that, her world shifted.

Taking a deep breath, she let the mask drop. Let him see the fear there. The fear that he would hurt her; that she would become inconsequential in this new world, broken and forgotten in a corner; that she would never be worth something more than what she was made to be.

The Hulk’s eyes widened. His shoulders loosened and he huffed again, softer this time, more like a whine.

She held out her hand to him. ‘I’m scared too,’ she whispered, walking forward until she could practically feel the heat radiating off his skin. ‘Believe me, I am. I always am.’ A smile slipped across her face at the familiarity of her sentence. ‘But we don’t have to be scared of each other. Not anymore.’

The Hulk stared at her, as though torn between ripping her to shreds and feeling sorry that she was so stupid to come this close and allow him to rip her to shreds.

She refused to let that fear stop her. Finally, she revealed the rock in her hands.

‘How about,’ she said, edging closer, ‘we put all your terrible feelings away for the day. Let this hold it for now and you can take it up when you need to again.’ She swallowed to wet her dry throat. She allowed her hand to shake, not hiding her fear at all. ‘Put it to bed for the day though. There’s plenty of time to feel those feelings.’

The Hulk stared at the rock. Something in his gaze softened. Just as slowly, he raised one of his massive hands.

She shivered and he reached out, his large finger brushing up against her.

She gasped, but didn't move. She felt the coarse dirt there, the calluses of his hand, the heat.

He did it again, gently, taking the rock from her. Then, he met her gaze.

His eyes were no longer acid green but were a honeyed brown.

She watched as the Hulk doubled over, grunting and groaning. But still, he kept eye contact with her as he shrunk into himself, gripping the dirt, the rock, his skin until the green receded and there laid Bruce, shirtless, sweating and gasping.

Reaching down, she intertwined her fingers in his. Automatically, he gripped her, eyes wide in panic, and she held out her other hand to him.

'You're okay,' she said.

He tried to push himself to his knees and she helped him up. Falling back on his haunches, his eyes searched her face.

'Did I hurt you?' he finally asked, voice gritty but unmistakably Bruce.

'No,' she said. 'I didn't hurt you either.'

He frowned before glancing behind her. 'Is that... Thor?'

'It is.'

'Huh.' He stiffened as he saw the perimeter of army soldiers and vehicles.

'Come on,' she pulled at his hands. 'We've got a Quinjet to catch out of this place.'

He looked questioningly at her, silently asking if their plan was successful.

All she could do was shrug; she didn't have the answers.

For once, she had to accept that in all actuality, she never did.

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Interlude 20

‘I swear to god, Lucy,’ Danielle grumbled, rubbing a hand over her face, ‘if this is a phone call where no one’s dying, you’re fired.’

‘Turn on the T.V.’

‘Who’s the boss here?’

‘If you didn’t notice, this is on the phone, not in the office. And after this, I should be getting a promotion.’

‘You’re optimistic, if delusional.’ Danielle grabbed the remote on her duvet. ‘I’ll give you that much.’

‘Oh, you’ll be giving me a lot more in a tic’.

The blue glare flashed over Danielle’s face. As the images and words registered, she threw off the covers. ‘Call any and every journalist associated with our newspaper.’

‘Already on it.’

‘Oh.’ She frantically pulled on a jacket. ‘And try to get onto Stu.’

‘Already on it.’

‘You’re a treasure, Lucy.’

‘I’ve been waiting ten years to hear you say that. Knew it would happen someday.’

Chapter 23

The long, steel corridor echoed Natasha's footsteps more with how empty it was of soldiers. With easy memory, she found the office doorway and without knocking, went in.

The skylight lit up the now empty desk and Sussler's pale hand tapped along the vinyl table covering.

'So,' Sussler didn't face Natasha as she shut the door of his office, 'zero results in finding the stolen children. Endangered hundreds of soldiers' lives with your choice of partner. Oh, yes. And suspicious activities through the night that cannot be confirmed with CCTV footage.' He turned to her. 'Shall I go on or do I need more to ruin your reputation as some sort of superspy and *Avenger*?'

He jumped back as she threw a Stark phone onto his desk.

'What the—'

She didn't bother to hear the rest of his gloating. 'You assume you have the pull to ruin *my* reputation.'

He laughed. 'You really think *you* are worth more than me, a respected general that survived the HYDRA cull? A war hero?'

She stared steadfastly back at him. 'Yes. I do.' She quirked her head. 'Turn on the phone and see what's trending in the news.'

She had to admit, he wasn't as stupid as she initially thought. He actually listened.

Soon, the news presenter's voice filled the room. '*Here we have footage of the moment when the missing twenty-one Alia Surat children emerged from what's been dubbed "Avengers Tower", claiming asylum from their home. To everyone's surprise, there was also the familiar face of previously missing Private Deborah Stanton. She is here to support the children's claim for asylum and provide evidence of mistreatment of Alia Surat natives.*'

It kept going more into detail and Natasha could even hear Pepper at one point saying, '*Our clients are being processed and will be taken to an undisclosed location from the media. All answers will be given in due course as to how they arrived here but for now, know they are finally safe and will be well taken care of.*'

Sussler's gaze raised to meet hers, teeth gritted, skin almost red instead of white. 'You did this. You cooperated with terrorists. You are nothing more than a traitor.' He spat. 'Nothing more than HYDRA.'

'Prove it. In between trying to prove that your existence here is justified and humane.' She plucked the phone from his grip. 'In the meantime, the Avengers Initiative is removing its support of this project due to the most recent allegations.'

'You will crash,' Sussler said after her, hands clenching at his side. 'You will crash and burn.'

She glanced over her shoulder as she opened the door. 'You assume I haven't already landed,' she said with a smile and a wink before leaving him behind.

Interlude 21

Desiree didn't know what this was; she hoped it was peace but she couldn't dare let herself believe she knew what that was.

She supposed, the only thing she *could* do, was hope.

Chapter 24

New York appeared colourless to Natasha. She sat in her apartment, watching as the day turned into night, the white and gold adding to the grey and black. The colours danced across her face. She didn't find it comforting like she thought she would.

Her feet tread the familiar path up to the communal lounge room, the carpet soaking up the footsteps she didn't bother to disguise.

It wasn't Bruce she found as she inadvertently hoped—after all, she hadn't seen him in the week they had come back. She suspected he was avoiding her.

Instead, Tony sat on the floor, back against the kitchen island, glass and bottle in hand.

He squinted up at her before holding out the bottle.

'Vodka?'

She took it from his hand, saying, 'Sure,' before taking a swig then sitting it on the marble countertop, away from his reach.

'Did I say I was done with that?'

'No.' She sat down beside him and treated him to a sideways smile.

Slowly, he returned it. They sat for a while as he exaggeratedly shook drops of vodka into his mouth from the bit left in his glass.

'I take it your mission didn't end the way you thought it would either.'

He peered into his glass. 'There was no Sun-Tao Yinsen. Long dead.' He turned to her with a smirk and a shrug. 'I'd say Winston knew that but hey, having me and Robin Hood there got them the go-ahead to raid where they thought some terrorist groups were.'

'How was the civilian count?'

He snorted. 'If me and Mr. Smiley weren't there, there would be no civilians to count. The ends would've justified the means.' He spun the glass over in his hands. 'Just reminded me why I got out of the whole arms dealer gig in the first place.' He eye-balled the bottom of the glass pointedly but she suspected it was so he didn't have to make eye contact as he said, in a softer, more genuine tone, 'There's no winners.'

She grabbed the vodka bottle, pouring him another shot. When he looked at her, she clinked the neck of it to his glass. 'I'll drink to that.'

'Cheers then,' he said and she took a gulp, relishing the burn and the buzz.

They sat in silence again, both watching the floor-to-ceiling windows, a part of but separate from the world outside at the same time.

'You know?' Tony mused, swishing the drink around in his glass before looking to her, chestnut brown eyes a little glassy but open. 'One day, I'm going to figure this thing out.'

'What? Life?' she joked.

'Yep,' he said. 'Figure it out and do it all right.'

She nodded slowly before patting him on the shoulder. 'Me too.'

The next day, before she was to be called before the courts to be witness to the claims for asylum of the Alia Surat twenty-one, she escaped to Central Park for a walk. She wasn't quite sure if it calmed her or not but it felt good to move freely and it was nice to see the green around instead of red dust.

When she got back to the Tower, Bruce sat at the common area kitchen.

'Ms. Romanoff.'

She jutted her chin at him. 'Dr. Banner.'

He indicated to a plate on the bench. 'I made you some food. Kofta balls. Hope you like it.'

'I'm not the fussiest eater, Doc,' she said, coming over to sit on the stool across from him. 'Thanks though.'

He nodded and she didn't touch the food because she knew that wasn't why he was here, though it probably was a nice reason as well.

'How do you think it'll go?' he asked.

She cocked her head thoughtfully. 'I think we'll probably get them to have asylum here. Stark's lawyers are doing over-time and Deborah is pretty damn convincing.'

He didn't have to say *but*, instead, giving her his whole attention.

'But I don't think that's going to change much. Certainly isn't going to make a whole nation retreat from Alia Surat.'

‘Might change the treatment of them and policies though,’ Bruce said.

‘Mightn’t it?’

‘Maybe.’

He smiled at her, the same, broken ironic smile he had given her from the beginning. ‘I suppose all we can do is hope.’

‘All we can do is hope,’ she echoed.

She watched as he moved to the sink, grabbing some water. He no longer held the grey glow but instead, was a soothing green.

She now had a favourite colour.

No longer holding a balancing act, her next words came out, unweighted and easy. ‘I have an idea. For future fights.’

He glanced back, almost at ease. ‘I’m all ears.’

She smirked. ‘You’re not going to like it.’

He shrugged, a hint of playfulness in his expression. ‘What else is new?’

‘Hopefully a lot of things.’

And with that, she leaped from her beam again, enjoying the freeing feeling of falling through the air.

Whether she landed or crashed, she would deal with it when it came.

After all, that was part of who Natasha Romanoff was.

Critical Exegesis

Making the Invisible Visible: Affective Engagement, Guided Interventions and Craft in Fan Fiction-modeled Storytelling

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1. Introduction: What can fan fiction offer a writer?

How can writers draw upon craft strategies common within fan fiction to provoke an affective response to a text that deliberately intervenes in an existing canon? This exegesis explores what I have learned from writing a hybridized novel set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), a project that involved balancing features of fan fiction such as the deliberate intervention in a franchised—predominantly white—world with those of a traditional action novel with its focus on a driving plot and tension rather than domesticity and comfort. In this introduction, I will explain how my personal journey has influenced my creative writing, my methodology in undertaking this creative-based research, the specific interventions I aim to make in the growing field of fan studies and my own contribution to Aboriginal literature in Australia. I want this exegesis to act as a useful resource to other writers interested in discovering what fan fiction can bring to the traditional novel format and the different ways we writers can tell stories.

My novel is largely set in a fictional version of Australia (known as the anagram Alia Surat) and is mainly from the viewpoint of Natasha Romanoff (aka ‘Black Widow’), the only female Avenger in the original cinematic team line-up. Natasha learns both what it is to be a white woman in a man’s world and also what it is to be a white woman in a black person’s land. As a result of her struggles, she gains new insights into the intersectional nature of categorizations such as race and gender. While female-oriented interventions in superhero media have become more common (such as *Wonder Woman*, 2017, and *Captain Marvel*, 2019), the Indigenous viewpoint remains underexplored. By writing *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, I aimed to explore a framework of affective hermeneutics that would allow the reader to empathize and identify with my characters while at the same time introducing and exploring an Indigenous viewpoint into the MCU. The latter, I found, required me to dig into the traumatic experiences of Aboriginal people within Australia and to imagine an alternative kind of superhero to the militaristic (and colonial) fighting force frequently depicted in the MCU.

In the first two chapters of this exegesis, I situate affective hermeneutics within fan fiction scholarship and outline the basis for my interventions. In the second two chapters, I hone in on particular aspects of craft which fan fiction develops

differently from mainstream writing, including the development of multiple viewpoint characters and a focus on domesticity over plot.

1.2. Auto-ethnography: The personal and the professional

As an Aboriginal woman, I am hyper-aware of Indigenous issues. My Honours thesis comprised a novella written in a realist mode which explored Aboriginal deaths in custody. I was under the impression that the more realistic—more traditionally literary—type of storytelling would be the best way to tell such a story. The novels whose examples I wanted to follow were great Aboriginal classics such as *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence* by the late Doris Pilkington Garimara (1996). But the study of Aboriginal deaths in custody became a traumatizing experience for me. It was not just the research but actually writing the novella, inserting myself into this world which was as unforgiving as real life. I developed severe depression, anxiety and stress, and could no longer sustain this form of writing. I started to question the impact these sorts of stories had on the reader and the writer. Though it was a brilliant piece of work, I could not endure all of *Follow the Rabbit-proof Fence* (Pilkington Garimara, 1996) in one sitting. There was no emotional protection for me to be able to say, ‘This isn’t real’.

To escape this traumatic writing experience, I turned to a very different style of narrative: fan fiction. My most intense moment of engagement—my transition into being *the fan*—happened when I saw *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) in the cinemas. *Iron Man 3* (2013) was life-altering. Before then, I did not know I was suffering from severe panic attacks and anxiety. But when I saw Iron Man go down on one knee, physically crippled by his anxiety, I knew I had found a friend and ally in Tony Stark. After that, I watched every other MCU movie on release. As time went on, I began to write MCU fan fiction about the Avengers’ personal lives, exploring my mental health issues through this comforting space. My readers, many of whom also suffered from anxiety and depression, said the stories helped them cope.

I did not realize I could incorporate this kind of engagement with popular materials into a PhD until I read *The Wow Climax* (2007) by Henry Jenkins and Judith Fathallah’s (2011) essay on her relationship with the subgenre of hurt/comfort in fan

fiction. Fanlore¹ (n.d., p. 1) defines hurt/comfort as a subgenre of fan fiction that concentrates on a character's physical or emotional pain and more importantly, the comfort they receive from other character/s as a result. The main purpose of hurt/comfort is character exploration, putting characters in extreme situations to bring out a different facet of their personality that remain unexplored in canon. In *The Wow Climax*, Jenkins (2007) writes an auto-ethnographic essay exploring his affective, nostalgic relationship with comic books. In a deeply personal tone, Jenkins (2007) articulates the connection between feeling and fan studies with a story about his mother's failing health and its correlation to his relationship with comic books. Meanwhile, Fathallah (2011) maps her relationship with hurt/comfort and her own personal health, demonstrating how the two intertwined over the years. These scholars (amongst many others like Matt Hills, 2002; Sheenagh Pugh, 2005; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; and Goodrum, Prescott and Smith, 2018) helped me understand how my own personal experiences and viewpoint could add to my scholarly research, that I could still write about subjects that were taxing, but in a genre that gave me comfort. My fannish practices changed the way I thought about writing and studies. I followed a similar pattern to Jenkins (2007) and Fathallah (2011), developing an understanding of themselves and the world through their respective fandoms and fannish practices.

Auto-ethnography proved to be a useful theoretical framework for productive insight as well as for making the 'Othered' narrative the focus of my PhD. First coined by David Hayana (quoted by Patton 2004, p. 2) to 'describe studies by anthropologists of their own cultures', Patton's (2004, p. 2) auto-ethnography examines how ethnography, sans the -auto, was used by predominantly white English anthropologists to study the 'Other', like communities in Asia and Africa. However, Patton (2004, p. 2) says auto-ethnography asks the crucial questions of, 'How does my own experience of my own culture offer insights about my culture, situation, event, and/or way of life?' without the 'burden or pretense of detachment'. In other words, auto-ethnography attempts to understand how the author's own views and experiences influence what they see and derive from certain social situations, communities or texts (usually their own, to help stop the 'Othering', which has been a large problem amongst anthropologists in Aboriginal communities in Australia since

¹ Fanlore (in a similar fashion to Wikipedia) is a fan wiki made by fans, for fans that defines fan terminology with definitions accepted by the fan community.

invasion). Patton (2004, p. 2) specifies that the quantity of personal experiences that are the focus of an author's auto-ethnographic study vary, but at the core, what distinguishes auto-ethnography from ethnography is 'self-awareness about and reporting of one's own experiences and introspections as a primary data source.' Popova (2020) acknowledges how auto-ethnography has been a standing methodology in which to examine fan studies, mentioning Jenkins' (1992) *Textual Poachers* along with Matt Hills' (2002) *Fan Cultures*. However, with the arrival of online fan communities, Popova (2020) believes the growing incorporation of auto-ethnography into fan studies is crucial in gaining new insights into fan cultures. Renaud (2014, p. 1) is another fan fiction writer and academic who is approaching fan studies in an auto-ethnographic way, drawing on her own experiences of writing fan fiction as a pre-teen. Renaud (2014, p. 1) believes fan fiction is 'textual expressions of the everyday lives of fans who draw on familiar characters and stories of popular culture to work through the emotions and frustrations of everyday life'.

This leads into why I believe it has been important to frame my work through auto-ethnography. Because the personal way I transitioned into being a fan of the MCU (on which I will go into detail in the next chapter), I would have lost crucial insights into affective-modelled learning if I had not drawn on my own experiences. At the same time, using auto-ethnography helped me step away from the danger of 'Othering', which has been (and continues to be) a real issue whenever writing about the Aboriginal community. As a Barkindji woman, I felt it was imperative to include my own experience, showing I am part of the community which is being acted upon. Auto-ethnography also tied into my Aboriginal ways of knowing methodology, complementing my theoretical frameworks to help give further insight into affective hermeneutics, but also, coloured feminism.

Having embraced my identity as a fan, I ran into another problem. I did not feel my world fit with the MCU. I could not envision where an Aboriginal woman like me and her viewpoint belonged. The release of *Black Panther* (2018) changed my mind. It was a revolutionary superhero film which portrayed a non-Western viewpoint and strong women of colour. People who were so often under- or misrepresented now resembled superheroes. There was an excited pride from African Americans evident in many articles around this beautiful moment in the history of cinema (Smith, n.d.). This changed the way I thought about my own experience with literature, especially genre fiction, and my visibility (or lack thereof) within it. Unfortunately, as an

Aboriginal woman, I am accustomed to being invisible in literature, especially growing up in the '90s and early '00s. The books I read became even more problematic for me when I and people who looked like me were not just invisible in texts, but represented in an outright racist light by white writers. But whereas mainstream writing was often dismissive, fan fiction offered a place to cut loose. Many fans have been tackling problematic representations by making themselves visible within the margins, as Una McCormack (2015) argues. There are published and unpublished replies to perceived problems in certain texts. Some of this has become known as postcolonial fan fiction, a subgenre of fan fiction dedicated to calling out misrepresentation and/or 'fixing' them, i.e., making the invisible visible.

If *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) started my love affair with the MCU and *Iron Man 3* (2013) taught me something about myself and made me see value in affect and my auto-ethnography, then it was *Black Panther* (2018) that made me braver. It helped me see that I (and every Indigenous person like and unlike me) had a right to exist in any world I wished to appear in. My culture deserves to be visible where it never has been before. So, I hope you enjoy living in my world, if only for a while. More than anything, I hope you understand what it can be like for an Aboriginal woman to live it and why, sometimes, it can be painful (emotionally and physically).

1.3. Creative Interventions: Writing a hybrid novel

In this section, I will set out a brief synopsis for my hybrid novel, highlighting the interventions I have made along the way.

Set between six months after the events of *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and before *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), my novel *Avengers: The Privileged Few* starts with Natasha in hiding. Called back to action to take part in an Avengers Ambassadorial program, she is thrilled but wary. While she wants to use her skills and remove the red in her ledger, she doesn't want to be near Bruce Banner, the one person she feels she can't control.

But Natasha soon realizes that Bruce isn't her only worry. In a tense meeting in New York, she learns most of the politicians of the Avengers Ambassadorial program have no interest in her participation. Initially sidelined, she jumps at the

chance to participate in General Sussler's mission in the country of Alia Surat: finding the children stolen by the Indigenous-run terrorist group, Nhuungku.

In a parallel storyline, readers follow Deborah Stanton, a soldier in the Alia Surat army. Taken prisoner by the Nhuungku terrorist group, she gets to know one of her captors, Desiree. Through sharing stories, Deborah realizes that Desiree and the group of predominantly Indigenous women didn't steal the children; they saved them from being stolen from their mothers, just as Desiree had been in the previous generation.

When Desiree and Natasha's worlds collide, Natasha is forced to take a side. Does she do what is legal or what she thinks is right?

I wrote a series of documentary-style journal articles and online discussions strewn throughout the chapters which provide commentary on the storylines, illuminating how the Western gaze can perpetuate White Savior complexes (the illusions of 'helping') and White ownership (a feeling of entitlement over another's decisions, believing that a Western person 'knows best').

The removal of children in the novel mimics the current removal of children in Australia with the Intervention and Future Australia policies (which I will examine in Chapter 3). At end of the novel, the children in *Avengers: The Privileged Few* don't get to stay in their own land but instead, have a better chance overseas of more equal treatment, showing the inherent institutionalised racism present in a country that used to be theirs, but is no longer for them.

Like my intended readers, Natasha undergoes her own process of affective learning. She returns home with a sense of her own worth, but also an understanding that her viewpoint as a white woman has limited her in the past. She emerges determined to be governed by her own values, rather than those the patriarchal society used to measure her.

1.4. Methodology: practice and process

To the best of my knowledge, there are no other practice-led studies where a fan fiction novel was submitted as the bulk of the research. While unusual, I believe my hybrid novel is filling an important gap in practice-based research, showing what fan fiction techniques writers can add to their traditional storytelling formats. In turn, this can help writers learn more about their craft and add to their toolbox. As I will

discuss, I learnt so much about the balance of domesticity and plot when writing in a traditional novel format while trying to capture the feel of a fan fiction story with its warmth and focus on positive character interactions when posting online and interacting with readers. I believe the novel has benefitted from fan fiction elements with its emphasis on affect and comfort. There is an intimacy created between writer and characters which hopefully transfers over between characters and readers. I also learnt about creative writing techniques (both fan fiction and traditional) I could use to invite an affective engagement with my novel. At the same time, I found it easier to write about the hard-hitting issues surrounding black and female bodies. I hope it is easier for readers to digest as well.

Graeme Sullivan (2010), in his ground-breaking monograph *Art-Practice as Research*, argues that in creative research, knowledge is not generated through data collection and analysis. Rather, knowledge is revealed through a dynamic process of interaction and reflection between and within the artists, the artworks and their audience. For him, 'these forms of understanding are grounded in human experiences and interactions and yield outcomes that can be individually liberating and culturally enlightening' (2010, p. 97). Writing my novel has been individually liberating by allowing me to once again tackle contemporary issues I care about while also expanding my knowledge of creative writing techniques in fan fiction and traditional novel formats to invite affective reactions. At the same time, by investigating an underrepresented viewpoint of an Aboriginal woman, I hope it will be culturally enlightening as well as give other creatives new ideas for their own projects. These new knowledges would not have been possible without doing practice-led research. Quoting Krauth, Cosgrove and Scrivener (2017, p. 6) believe that a Creative Writing PhD is a site of 'radical experimentation, for the sake of progressing the literature and knowledge'. This embodies what a novel can do and what one can learn undertaking such a venture.

However, despite the discipline's growth over recent years, the methodologies and knowledge transfer processes associated with practice-led research in the field are still under-developed. Stephanie Vanderslice argues that creative writing has now reached a pedagogical tipping point, and the steady work of scholars such as Paul Dawson, Andrew Cowan, Jeri Kross, Graeme Harper, David Myers and others demonstrates a growing body of criticism which positions creative writing as 'something that can be taught and researched' (2011, p. 2). The methodologies of

practice-led creative writing research are still in development and many of its pedagogies are still predominantly ‘lore-based’ or, as Dawson (2003) puts it, the ‘guild knowledge’ of published writers. In many cases, these need further unpacking and evidentiary support. This exegesis, then, aims to contribute to the discipline by exploring the ‘lore’ and ‘guild knowledge’ of a very different group of writers who have developed in parallel to the traditional forms of writing that have emerged via writing centres, traditional publishing mentorships and editorial processes, and universities. As such, throughout I adopt a style of writing up my insights inspired by a mode particular to fan fiction: 5 Things + 1. This is a writing structure that links a set of multiple scenes, with one final disruptive element. Alberts, Drummond and Freiman (2017, p. 11) states that with a Creative Writing PhD, ‘It is the making which illuminates’. I have found this to be the case for my experience and I hope others will find the same in the making and in the reading of stories.

1.5. My Critical Framework: Affective Hermeneutics and Fan Fiction Interventions

Embarking on this PhD, I wanted to understand the value of affect in fan fiction to writers and readers. I wanted to unabashedly embrace the passion surrounding fan fiction, recognising the value in it because of what it has given me and my reading/viewing experience. While many scholars have defined affect (like Silvan Tomkins, 1962; Lawrence Grossberg, 1992; Brian Massumi, 1995; Eve Sedgwick, 2003; Eric Shouse, 2005; and Henry Jenkins, 1992 and 2007 to name a few), Anna Wilson’s (2016a) article on affective hermeneutics opened up the door for me to explore affect in a critical light. Wilson (2016a) defines affective hermeneutics as ‘a set of ways of gaining knowledge through feeling’. She argues that affective hermeneutics directs ‘focus towards moments of high emotion in a text that stimulates equally strong feelings in the reader’. Chapter 2 of this exegesis builds on her work by outlining a framework around the heuristic values of affective hermeneutics. In this chapter, I will sift through the conflicting definitions of *affect* from sociologists and psychologists and ultimately make suggestions about craft strategies that deliberately create affective responses within readers.

In Chapter 3, I look at the role of interventions within fan fiction writing and provide a conceptual background to my own approach. My three main interventions

are: the inclusion of Aboriginal ways of knowing; a critique of unremarked Whiteness; and the exploration of coloured feminism, centring on ownership of women's bodies. These interventions are forms of disruption, inputting an Aboriginal, feminist viewpoint where there were faulty or no representations before. I encourage readers to look through an Indigenous lens rather than automatically employing a Western ideological viewpoint (White gaze) when examining Indigenous issues or culture. A key theme I explore is unremarked Whiteness, how before *Black Panther* (2018) the MCU seldom acknowledged White privilege and the White gaze. In my novel, *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, I draw attention to the Whiteness at work in the MCU, making Aboriginal ways of knowing, and historical and present systems of abuse at work within Australia visible. To counter this, I embrace the intersectionality of interventions that centre on Indigeneity and feminism, often combining to form coloured feminism. Moreton-Robinson (2000) explores the exclusion of black women in mainstream feminism, showing how the topics of race and gender combine. She (2000) points out how white Australians (in this case, referring to white Australian women) need to learn about Indigenous issues and view them the way Indigenous women do, rather than through a Western lens (also known as the White gaze). Again, while many scholars have opened up new ways of thinking for me around Whiteness, feminism and Indigeneity (like Edward Said, 2003; Robin DiAngelo, 2011; Chris Graham, 2017; and Goodrum, Prescott and Smith, 2018), it is Aileen Moreton-Robinson's work that I have found the most influential with her writings and emphasis on not only Indigeneity and feminism, but the marriage of coloured feminism.

Before progressing, I will briefly lay out some important points about the terminology I use throughout this exegesis. While *intervention* is a negative word when applied to Indigenous affairs, fan fiction is about reclaiming narratives. This is what I intend to do with the term, using it as a way of me intervening into problematic practices, and representing an Aboriginal viewpoint. The same goes for *coloured* when referring to feminism. Again, this term has been predominantly negative when applied to Indigenous people (as well as many other marginalised groups). But I have decided to use it as a way of making the invisible visible, i.e., colouring in feminism with my colours to show an Aboriginal woman's viewpoint. My colour can be seen and acknowledged without it being negative. I should also specify that I will be predominantly talking about Aboriginal colonisation, oppressive policies and

experiences. I cannot speak for my Torres Strait Islander brothers and sisters as their colonisation was very different from Aboriginal Australia. I will not talk from a viewpoint that I have no right to speak from. That deserves another PhD altogether by a Torres Strait Islander academic.

Chapter 4 turns to the handling of close characterisation through free indirect discourse and the exercises usually associated with fan fiction (5+1 stories and drabbles) that I used to develop characters and their free indirect POV. While the first half of the exegesis concentrates on the theoretical aspects of the PhD, the second half looks at the craft techniques I used in-depth to help bring the theoretical aspects of affective learning and my interventions into practice. This is the first chapter that looks at the practical, craft issues and how I believe free indirect discourse and the exercises I used helped get my points across.

Chapter 5 is the final chapter on the practical aspects of the PhD and is where I examine positive group dynamics and how domesticity can be used in more action-based genres. The positive group dynamics adds to the examination of characterisation of the array of characters in *Avengers: The Privileged Few* while I look at the layers of domesticity and how I can use secondary storytelling sources to help expand on how different genres tell their story.

Using craft strategies common within fan fiction and making specific interventions in the MCU canon, I have explored potentially traumatic themes in a way that promotes comfort for readers while they face these hard topics and hopefully form empathy around those very subjects. I have also given an overview of the *Avengers: The Privileged Few* (my Creative project for this PhD), my methodologies and what to expect in the chapters to come in this exegesis. In conclusion, I hope to encourage writers to make themselves visible where they have not been traditionally seen, something fan fiction has helped me to do in my own writing. I also hope to add to the craft knowledge being built through Creative Writing PhDs that may be potentially useful for other creatives to add to their toolbox.

Chapter 2: A Paradigm for Affective Learning

2.1. Introduction

When I first watched *Iron Man* (2008), I formed no connection to it. It was a fun movie and I thought Tony Stark was an interesting character, but that was as far as my investment went. *Iron Man 3* (2013) was a different experience. I went from enjoying the MCU to being emotionally invested after watching Tony Stark experience a panic attack. I learnt something about anxiety watching the film, understanding how it was possible to function with panic attacks and I wasn't less of a person because of my struggles with anxiety and depression. I began to ask myself, how did my feelings change? Why did *Iron Man 3* (2013) shift my relationship with the MCU (and more specifically, Tony Stark) from entertained consumer to invested and caring fan? In this section, I will introduce a definition of affect; the importance of affect (broadly) in fan fiction; hurt/comfort; affective engagement/attachment/learning; contrast with the hermeneutics of suspicion; the link between affect and empathy; and, finally, investigate my craft to see how my novel invites affective learning.

2.2. The importance of affect for fan fiction

The lay definition of 'affect' encompasses a warm, loving or fond attachment to someone or something, yet within literary criticism and cultural analysis—the two fields I draw upon as the foundations of my approach—the definition is far more nuanced². Eve Sedgwick argues more broadly that '[a]ffects can be, and are, attached to things, people, ideas, sensations, relations, activities, ambitions, institutions, and any number of other things, including other affects' (2003, p. 19). This helps capture the freedom of affect as a sensation and how it is not confined to only positive feelings. Massumi (1995, p. 85) categorizes affect as an intensity that can translate a 'negative observation into a positive one', a definition which helps to explain why someone can feel positively attached to a text even if it makes them cry. My working

² Please note that I will not be examining affect through a psychoanalytic lens. Instead, I am more interested in affect in a critical literary reading sense. Cultural analysis will come into my examination as well, trying to understand how affect works within fan cultures, and the wider literary as well as academic community. I will also relate affect back to my creative writing project so will be creatively engaging with affect, seeing how I can apply it to my craft.

definition of affect for this PhD is now a visceral reaction (perceived positive or negative) to stimuli which gauges how strongly a person feels about the stimuli.

Affect has a particularly important role within fan fiction studies. My primary touchstone remains the pioneering work of Anna Wilson (2016a, p. 1) who defines affective hermeneutics (a term I will return to as I outline my own model) as ‘a set of ways of gaining knowledge through feeling’. To me, Wilson (2016a, p. 1) positions this as a special feature of fan fiction, distinguishing it from other genres such as action, fantasy or science fiction with which it might otherwise be closely aligned:

To define fan fiction only by its transformative relationship to other texts runs the risk of missing the fan in fan fiction—the loving reader to whom fan fiction seeks to give pleasure. Fan fiction is an example of affective reception... It is a form of reception that is organized around feeling.
(Wilson, 2016a, p. 1)

Wilson (2016a, p. 1) says that this type of hermeneutics brings a reader’s attention to strong, emotional moments ‘in a text that stimulate equally strong feelings in the reader; these heighten a sense of empathy, connection, or intimacy between the reader and the characters in the text’. Wilson (2016b) says an affective hermeneutic reading can be seen as an ‘[e]xcessive, feelings-y, full-body reading... often associated with reading for pleasure’. It is important to note up front that fan fiction does not only deal primarily in positive affect. Audiences can experience sadness and frustration as a result of, say, the death of a well-loved character. This was famously shown when Sir Arthur Conan Doyle tried to kill off Sherlock Holmes before coming under pressure by his many readers who went into mourning for the fictional character (Jamison, 2013, pp. 42-43). But rather than prompting disengagement, more often than not, these negative emotions can spur on resistive writing and deeper attachment, as I will discuss further on.

Hurt/comfort is a prime example of negative affect still being viewed as positive. Because while characters in these stories experience much pain (usually more emphasis on emotional even when there is physical injury) and sadness, there is such an emphasis on the *comfort* that the character receives from the other people in the story. This comfort transfers over to the reader, often causing them to feel as though they have just received the comfort that character did. This has caused hurt/comfort to become one of the most popular subgenres of fan fiction, arguably

because of the comfort readers vicariously receive. On Archive of Our Own, one of the most popular fan-sharing websites, when a story is tagged as having ‘Hurt/No Comfort’, it is treated as a form of trigger warning. This notifies the reader that they will not receive any comfort here, even though the character will be put through the same torment. This is a much less popular tag, only used approximately 15,000 times as of February 2021. This is opposed to the ‘Hurt/Comfort’ tag, which is used over 420,000 times on Archive of Our Own as of the same date. Readers seem to be more drawn to this subgenre because there is a softer, more intimate relationship formed between reader and character, as they see the character go through the pain, but they also experience the comfort, causing a warm resolution and feeling to follow long after the story is over.

The importance of an ‘[e]xcessive, feelings-y, full-body reading’ to fan fiction has been observed by many scholars (Jenkins, 1992 and 2007; Pugh, 2005; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; and Jamison, 2013). These feelings can be born out of love or frustration for a favourite text, as examined by Una McCormack (2015). In the introduction to their compilation of essays, Busse and Hellekson (2006, p. 29) say that many of the essays compliment and epitomize ‘the affective nature of fandom and the fannish community itself’. In Camille Bacon-Smith’s (1991, p. 53) categories of fan fiction, the connecting factor between them all arguably appears to be affect, but most of all, she believes fan fiction emphasises affect and character (as I will discuss in a later chapter). Bacon-Smith (1991, p. 53) argues that while some stories can be continuing adventures of the canonical content or other genres not necessarily associated with character development, in fan fiction, there is always greater emphasis on characters and their interactions between each other, based in affect. Fries (2013) agrees with this attachment to characters. A well-known writer in the Sherlock fandom, she (2013, p. 52) says, ‘*Last, it’s always about love. We don’t fall in love with explosions or spaceships or mysteries. We fall in love with people*’ [original emphasis].

However, it could be argued that romance and erotica also do this, promoting characters over fast-paced plot. This brings me to the second part of fan fiction that makes it unique when it comes to affect: its audience and the affective relationships within.

It is key to the discussion, the importance of this affective engagement from audiences. Arguably, much of fan fiction is about affect and community. The feelings created by the stories feed back into the community, engaging, inspiring, and at times, in my opinion, healing. As Anna Wilson (2016a, p. 1) suggests, to ignore the affect within fan fiction is to ignore and risk missing the fan, 'the loving reader to whom fan fiction seeks to give pleasure.' Zizi Papacharissi (2014) adds another interesting layer to understanding the audience of fan fiction or online social structures, saying it can create 'structures of feeling' (2014, p. 107). She (2014, p. 107) adds that structures of feeling can also be understood as 'forms and conventions shared by those living through a particular era', sharing similar experiences by existing in a "“living and interrelated continuity”". This definition helps illuminate how affect is threaded through not just fan fiction, but fandom audiences that participate in such social and fan service activities like reading and creating texts around favourite media. Papacharissi (2014, p. 108) emphasises the affective elements of such online societies and groups, saying how that this sort of 'sentiment, pre-formed or mediated,' can lead 'the way into locating one's own place in a converged sphere of activity'. Using Twitter as an example, Papacharissi (2014, p. 109) shows how these connective discourses can create a 'trope of belonging', which can evolve into what she refers to as 'affect mini-worlds'. While Papacharissi (2014) is using Twitter as an example, this applies perfectly to the world of fan fiction and the communities it creates, with fan fiction often being a collaborative act where readers will communicate with writers and writers will incorporate ideas and nods to the readers who review and support their creative endeavours.

This two-fold approach of fan fiction to affect, where plots are often constructed around 'feels' and the affective fan communities that participate in the production and proliferation of fan content, make it a ripe ground for developing an affective learning paradigm.

The production of fan fiction can also be seen as a labour of love. Pugh (2005, p. 218) agrees with this, noting that fan fiction involves a deep and visceral connection to the text. Jenkins (1992, p. 174) comments on the affective intensification of fan fiction and how the sub-genre of hurt/comfort is used almost exclusively for these occasions. However, as pointed out by Bacon-Smith (1991, p. 53) earlier, the emphasis on character development, interactions and relationships are given pride of place within most fan fiction stories, even if it is categorized as 'more

of' rather than 'more from' as Pugh (2005, pp. 19-21) would say. 'More of' is defined as wanting more of the same from a well-loved novel or film with not much changed; 'more from' is defined as wanting more from the original text than what it gave because it lacked in certain facets such as character development, diversity and satisfying relationships.

Fan fiction's pleasure-focused affective hermeneutics can usefully be contrasted with the hermeneutics of suspicion commonly seen as the 'natural mode' of literary engagement within the academy. Hermeneutics of suspicion, as described by Eve Sedgwick, teaches students under the guise of critical thinking to approach texts with something close to hostility and to 'investigate it like a crime' (Wilson, 2016b). The obvious contrast between these methods of reading, only one of which has been promoted within literary studies, has had important consequences for the under privileging of fan fiction. Lawrence Grossberg (1992) talks about how scholars almost have to deny their fannish interests to be taken seriously as academics. Yet Wilson (2016b, p. 1) shows that the hermeneutics of suspicion has its origins in sexism and patriarchy, 'built on centuries of philosophical and pedagogical ideologies that separate body and mind then rank the mind above the body'. These ideologies 'associate the mind, in all its rational dimensions, with men, and the body with women, effeminacy and femininity' (Wilson, 2016b, p. 1). Likewise, Gabrielle Jackson's (2019) book, *Pain and Prejudice*, explores the sexist hysteria that has been linked to women simply because of their bodies, arguing the patriarchy has diminished and policed the value of a female's thoughts and emotions. Bacon-Smith (1991) observes obvious gendering in her study of early *Star Trek* fandoms, arguing that women were not given a place amongst science fiction societies and instead, felt safer staying in the shadows, only sharing their fan fiction writing with those they knew they could trust.

The deprivileging of affective hermeneutics creates a challenge for a dissertation attempting to explore a new mode of writing. Hills (2002, pp. 103-104), in *Fan Cultures*, says that fans' emotions, affects and fantasies should be recognised as a form of knowledge, because they are not just an addition to culture, but also a creation of culture. Wilson (2016a) acknowledges that affective and critical hermeneutics are often in direct contention with each other, with 'affective, empathetic, excessive' readings framed as inherently uncritical.

Instead, I argue there is something important to be gained from a focus on feelings—empathy and solidarity. Kingsolver (2003, p. 230) believes fiction can create more empathy and solidarity than a newspaper can as it makes a person empathize and feel everything that character is, living a life you never would have had a chance to live before: ‘Literature duplicates the experience of living in a way that nothing else can, drawing you so fully into another life that you temporarily forget you have one of your own’. She (2003, pp. 230-231) adds how it can soothe an angry mind, causing someone to identify and sympathise with a previous issue that they didn’t care about. If empathy is fiction’s great superpower, then there ought to be value in distinctly and deliberately pleasurable forms of textual engagement. As I will argue, fan fiction can create powerful feelings that can encourage people to identify, question and advocate for issues that may have gone unnoticed before; or even become self-aware if they were opposing a person(s) or subject(s) because of fear and distrust created from unfamiliarity. Affective hermeneutics values what the heart has to say, what a piece can make a reader feel and, crucially, what can be learnt through this type of full-body reading.

2.3. The Three Tiers of Affective Engagement

In the previous section, I discussed the importance of affect to fan fiction broadly and I contrasted affective hermeneutics with the hermeneutics of suspicion. In this section, I will explore in more detail how affect can structure an emotional response to a text, according to three levels of engagement: affective reaction, affective attachment and affective learning, with this latter being the deepest level of engagement.

I begin with a reader’s reaction to a text, drawing on the work of Eric Shouse (2005), Lawrence Grossberg (1992) and Brian Massumi (1995). Shouse (2005) defines affect as the initial reaction people have to stimuli, in this case, texts. Shouse (2005, p. 1) argues that affect is prepersonal, taking place without a person’s knowledge or say-so. In Shouse’s (2005) definition, affect is more or less something beyond control in terms of when and how it gets activated. Grossberg (1992), on the other hand, argues that affect can be enacted and engaged on purpose by a text. Grossberg (1992) does not believe affect is a sole experience, unattached from the rest of a person, but that it intertwines with their ideological beliefs, or ‘mattering maps’

as he refers to them, issues, morals and stories someone personally identifies with. For Grossberg (1992), affect relates into people's cultural and social environment, forming part of who they are, and believes certain 'apparatuses' or in other words, texts, can correlate with their sensibilities or affect. For an example, my later attachment to the film *Iron Man 3* (2013) came because it helped me understand my own anxiety. While Shouse's (2005) argument that affect is the sensation behind why we as a people feel the intensity of feelings is helpful in attempting to define what affect is, I tend to fall on Grossberg's (1992) side. While affect is linked to our ideological beliefs, I argue our 'mattering maps' consist of more than our ideologies. The mattering maps could link into those core parts that make up our identities. For example, being a father would automatically factor into a male's identity when he becomes one. If affect taps into the mattering maps, both Shouse (2005) and Grossberg (1992) universally agree that affect is powerful and not only makes people feel something intensely, but can inspire critical resistance against sometimes unquestioned biases and shifting in thinking. Massumi (1995, p. 4) notes intensity as an important part of the discussion, a point supported by my earlier discussion of fan fiction. The greater the intensity, the more a person connects with the work. Thus, we can again see that affect is not always positive. Horror and tragedy are well-known genres which produce an intense reaction. Massumi (1995, p. 7) believes affect, or, as he calls it, 'intensity', is the core aspect to understanding literature and visual-based texts in modern society.

While readers and viewers may have a strong affective reaction, this does not automatically translate into an affective attachment or action inspired by the attachment. What is it that makes us engage and want to continually engage with a text affectively? I propose that Shouse (2005) and Grossberg (1992) are describing two different reactions caused by affect. I define these as *affective reactions*, which relates to Shouse's (2005) research and *affective attachment* which relates to Grossberg's (1992) research. An *affective reaction* is where, for example, a person jumps at a scary moment in a horror movie or cries at a sad one, e.g., in response to films such as *The Conjuring* (2013) or *The Lion King* (1994) respectively. Henry Jenkins (2007, p. 7) refers to this as affective intensification. Hurt/comfort, the subgenre dedicated to breaking a character apart to piece them back together with love and kindness, is a perfect example of affective intensification. It takes a character to their lowest to be able to show their feelings at a high state. For me personally, my

affective reaction to *Iron Man 3* (2008), while witnessing Tony Stark's panic attack, was to cry as I felt overwhelmed with realisation. It feels almost ineffable to begin to explain how I felt when I saw that moment. Hills (2014, p. 13), quoting Christopher Bollas, acknowledges these transformative becoming-the-fan experiences as often being 'fundamentally wordless occasions'. It was surreal realizing that the anxiety I had been battling wasn't something which only affected me. It made me feel so *seen* to see Tony Stark going through the exact thing I was and I felt every moment. To witness the panic attack opened me up to understanding my mental health issues, dealing with them and learning to live with them. Yet *affective attachment* goes deeper than affective reaction. Building on the work of Grossberg (1992), I suggest affective attachment occurs when a reader continues to engage with a text because of the strength of their feelings. This might be returning to a favourite book because of the confidence or safety it gives that person whenever they return to that familiar space. The reader champions that text because it continually engages them in a visceral and affective way. This would relate to the way I return to the MCU, whether through writing fan fiction or re-watching my favourite MCU films when I'm depressed, finding comfort in the space.

The deepest form of engagement—*affective learning*—borrows its terminology from Anna Wilson's affective hermeneutics and describes how a text can encourage a reader to understand facets of society and even themselves through the feelings it provokes. I propose that fan fiction is a powerful medium to do this because, as established, the genre is often constructed around affect. We might define affective learning as *learning something in a text through the affect it produces*. In a way, it can be seen as a lesson taken from a movie that you feel down in your bones. As Jenkins (2011, p. 3) says, popular cultures, such as fan creations, often make us think by making us feel. This is also known as '*the feels*'³ in the fandom community. Taking it back to the personal examples, while I have an affective attachment to *The Lion King* (1992), I have not come away with that life-changing lesson produced through affective learning. With *Iron Man 3* (2013), it was a completely different case for me. I learnt something through affective learning: *One can have a mental illness, not be broken and continue to live a fulfilling and happy life alongside that mental*

³ Fanlore (n.d., p. 1) defines 'feels' as short for feelings and while "'feelings'" may refer to a broad range of emotions under many circumstances, "feels" is almost always fandom-specific, referring to feelings evoked specifically by fannish experiences'.

illness. I empathized with the character of Tony Stark, seeing him in a heightened moment of emotional intensification with his panic attack. Not only did it create empathy within me, I identified with a character that I liked and could see my own struggle mimicked on the screen. I saw him at his lowest and followed him as he didn't simply overcome the panic attacks, but learned how to handle them, living a fulfilling life, being a *hero*, with anxiety. Afterwards, I realized that I didn't have to let my own panic attacks control me, but that I could learn a way to cope while still doing work that I loved. Through my affection for and affective engagement with the character of Tony Stark, I learned something about myself, the world I was in and felt I understood the film and characters within better. I had a powerful reading through affective learning. This is a big lesson that I have continued to feel. Whether that was the lesson it was trying to teach me, I doubt it—but it is the one I came away with. It was transformative for my mental health and helped me regain a love for study and writing (and, in turn, make my voice heard) that I thought I had lost. Hills (2014, p. 12) notes that not all of these personal engagements with such texts will be transformative, but the ones that are can be compared to our 'true self' meeting with a text at 'just the right time'. This is an interesting point that if I had watched *Iron Man 3* (2013) years before developing panic attacks, I would most likely not feel as transformed as I did when encountering this film (and *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, 2015, my first point of entry into this fandom) when I did.

It is also important to note that particular hermeneutic experiences may be unique to individual readers. As Barthes (n.d.) argues, authors (myself included) can hope readers engage with their work in certain ways, but have no guarantee. This does not stop authors from creating stories and characters to try to make an emotional impact to change hearts and minds. In the next section, I will discuss how I approached *Avengers: The Privileged Few* from this critical standpoint, attempting to deploy elements of craft that might cause readers to re-evaluate previous texts and re-evaluate their own thoughts. I incorporated my understanding of affective hermeneutics into *Avengers: The Privileged Few* through two layers. Firstly, I deliberately set out to model for the reader how my characters would come to understand the importance of affect in their own decision-making (thus allowing them to experience affective learning themselves). Secondly, I invited an affective learning centred on comfort. If all goes the way I have planned, readers might engage in

affective learning and learn something different about themselves or the world around them that has an affective impact.

Before I go into how I modelled affective learning in *The Avengers: The Privileged Few*, I would like to clarify how my affective three-tiered paradigm sits within two large schools of thought around affect: Deleuzian and psychoanalytic.

2.4. Deleuze and Affect

Shouse (2005) and Massumi (1995) in large part derive their definitions of affect from a Deleuzian form of thinking, particularly on the thought of affect being pre-personal. Reyes (2012, p. 6) says that Deleuze believed the body was forever in a form of transition, unable to predict what affect it could be impressed by or when the affect could be enacted; instead, affect simply happens step-by-step and in those very moments. Reyes (2012, pp. 4-5) argues:

The body's capacities and features are not always already given, but can only be properly defined with regard to the specific affections that constantly have an impact on the body's power of acting ... What a body can do therefore always depends upon the particular type of bodily affection. The body's power of acting increases, for example, when the body is affected with joy, and diminishes when it is affected with sadness or fear. Hence, as each individual body has the double capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies.

This feeds into my proposal that affect can be the catalyst for change, if the reader is impacted enough by the affective text, moving their body towards change, perhaps only mentally, physically, i.e., refusing to believe the racist rhetoric on First Nations people perpetuated by some media outlets or going to marches to protest Aboriginal deaths in custody respectively.

David Cole (2009) draws attention to the two-fold approach of Deleuze to affect: the enacting of the affect and the receiving of the affect. Using an example of teaching, Cole (2009) examines how teachers can possibly pass on affect through their passion in a classroom, signifying a kind of power which students may latch onto and inherit; however, he acknowledges it is not as simple as that because students may not be in the emotional, cultural or sociological position to take on the affect the teacher is bringing into the classroom. This relates to the 'mattering maps'

as referred to by Grossberg (1992) where affect can link in and intensify a student's current belief system or influence it in a way they never thought possible. It is also in the same context in which I wanted to write *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, realizing that, for my readers to have a chance of having an affective reaction, engagement and even learning, I would have to affectively engage with these characters and hopefully deliver my writing in an affective manner, therefore, enacting the two-fold manner of affect that Deleuze thinking mentions.

2.5. Psychoanalysis and Affect:

A pervasive thought that appears throughout the Deleuzian affect model is that affect is a step-by-step process and one that can never be predicted or attempted to be enacted beforehand, something even sometimes impossible to articulate, but just *is*.

There is another, more psychoanalytic school of approach to affect. Hills (2005), drawing on research by Bollas, argues for the benefit of a psychoanalytic approach to research in fan studies, particularly on fan affect, saying that, 'Integrating psychoanalytic thought into data gathering can... open a distinctive space for self-reflexivity' (p. 807). Hills (2005) says that while the object of fandom can be aleatory, scholars (and I argue, other fans) can examine their own affective attachments and learn the how and why of those affects, feelings and emotions through psychoanalysis of their responses to the affective object. Again, there is the acknowledgement of the pre-personal, Deleuzian school of thought where an affect simply *happens* but Hills (2005) argues, through psychoanalytic approach, we can start to understand why we attach to these aleatory objects and what and how they make us feel like they do.

In my tripartite model of affective learning, it crosses between the Deleuzian school of thought and the psychoanalytic with its three layers, the first being the pre-personal, the affective reaction, where we can cry unwillingly at a sad film or scream at a jump-scare, all the way to affective learning, where through psychoanalysis, we as readers can begin to understand what we have learned through affective attachment to our, at times, aleatory fan subject.

Now, having framed how my affective learning paradigm crosses between the two schools of thought, I will move onto how incorporated my aforementioned layers of affective learning into *The Avengers: The Privileged Few*

2.6. Modelling Affective Learning: Natasha's Journey

Natasha is one of the main characters learning about the importance of affect in her decision-making. Importantly, over the course of the novel, she comes to the realisation that this typically feminine attribute has value. When Natasha returns from her exile at the beginning of the novel, she is initially excited to be part of missions again. However, when she attends the all-male meeting on the Ambassadorial Avengers Initiative, she is invisible (pp. 55-58). Her contribution as a woman isn't only unwanted but it is unvalued. Rather than resisting the patriarchal devaluation of her worth as a person, Natasha becomes determined to *prove* her value by performing well according to their expectations. Crucially, Natasha feels it is a perceived weakness if she shows she cares about someone or something, so she pushes those feelings down. Wilson (2015) touches on this in her PhD, examining how academic women have been forced to push aside and/or hide their fannish love and pursuits so they might be taken more seriously. Natasha follows this route. When she is devastated after the senate meeting to realize she has been relegated as useless, she tries to reign in her upset, thinking: 'She only ran so she could hide her emotions from the others. Get control of herself to not show her hand' (p. 65). Natasha doesn't believe that her affect (coded feminine) will be of use to her so she decides that she must discard it if she wants to be valued by (patriarchal) society. At the same time, she equates emotions to less intelligence, unwilling to see that heart and mind can co-exist.

The novel frames emotions as a danger and a weakness in the beginning. This notion of danger surrounding emotion is emphasised particularly with Natasha's interactions with Bruce Banner, a character whose alter ego The Hulk might be seen as embodying prototypical masculine values: strength. Since The Hulk has physical power over her, Natasha is determined Banner will have no emotional hold on her. Instead, she plans to control him with the only thing she believes she can: *his* emotions. After all, although The Hulk might be strong, his other defining feature is his uncontrollable rage. Yet this puts Natasha in a bind. She doesn't want to be coded as the typical feminine stereotypical carer where her only value is to love something into submission. This is again where she tries to reign in her behaviour when presented with the mission in Alia Surat from Sussler. She wants to prove her strength and rationality, something she only believes she can have without being painted

misogynistically by the patriarchy as overly emotional: '[Natasha] [w]ithheld herself. Didn't lash out, didn't become unreasonable, didn't scream, didn't hit, didn't do anything' (p. 72). Goodrum, Prescott and Smith (2018, p. 5) touch on the idea that making a strong female character should not involve simply inverting a male character; instead, they said it can include reclaiming typically feminized traits and learning the value of them outside of violence. Natasha takes her cue from Bruce, which is something I intended, a male embracing coded feminized traits outside of violence, realising the value not just for a woman, but for people in general.

But this poses a quandary: why can't Natasha be caring while still being intelligent and strong? This is something that Natasha can't understand, as she has been shown over and over again that she will only be valued for her violence (and her sexuality when controlled by men, which will be examined in Chapter 3). For example, when Sussler comes to ask her to track down the stolen children, she doesn't care about the ethics of the mission; she is too busy feeling thrilled that she is being valued for a typically coded masculine trait, her violence and *logic* (mind as opposed to heart): "'They requested for me.'" Natasha refused to let her voice rise in pride. She wasn't deliriously happy to be made worthwhile. Not at all' (p. 79). She is infuriated when Bruce questions the ethics of the mission and feels he is undermining her. She does not see the value in his worry about the Avengers doing the *right* thing, rather than what is an order. Bruce, on the other hand, sees affect as a valuable asset to his life. Despite the coded masculine violence (seen as *strength*) being socially valued, he realizes that without caring, all the people around him would be hurt. Without his heart, he would use the Hulk to his advantage rather than to better the lives of others. He recognises he has feelings and gets frustrated at how out of control they can become (when he has a form of a panic attack upon arriving in Alia Surat) but he also recognises the value they possess in his decision-making:

But, he could also recognize where they [feelings] had come in handy to him in the past. The fact he cared about keeping them under control was something in and of itself. (p. 98)

As a scientist, Bruce obviously values the mind. But he sees that discarding ethics and feelings isn't smart and actually limits his decision-making capabilities. Bruce could win any fight he chooses but chooses not to fight if it could endanger innocent people. Natasha draws attention to that fact in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). Ironically

enough, despite Bruce wanting to embrace his emotions, he has to strongly police them as well. But it is his caring that makes him make the effort to police them. In a poignant scene where Natasha helps him find a rock that he uses to reduce his panic attack, Bruce realizes how this technique has no *reason* behind it to work. Still though, it makes him happier and he comes to the conclusion: ‘In the end, wasn’t that all that mattered?’ (p. 100). In turn, Natasha starts to realize that the more she shows her true emotions around Bruce, the more he trusts her.

Although Natasha explores her own emotions to develop a connection with Bruce, it takes the course of the novel for her to understand the wider ethical implications of her involvement in Alia Surat. Still though, Natasha tries to block out her affective learning of the situation in Alia Surat. When she is being briefed by Sussler just after a bombing, she doesn’t want to be dragged into thinking about the kids and how the governmental treatment is affecting them. Instead, she wants to get in and out to do her job without engaging with the emotions this sort of mission could bring up:

Natasha could have done without the theatrics... she wasn’t a government official he was trying to win over with a supporting vote... but she allowed him to go on. (p. 113)

Instead, she tries to come at the situation from a tactical angle, attempting to discover that Sussler is conducting illegal business and inhuman actions against the Indigenous people of the Northern Hopes communities. When Natasha learns that the actions of the Alia Surat government are technically legal, she realizes that the logic of the legality of the situation is fundamentally flawed. After briefly meeting Desiree (my original Indigenous superhero character), Natasha comes to understand that it can’t be all right to treat another human being with such disrespect, regardless of whether it is legal. When her critical side tries to justify her mission, she rebels against it: ‘She felt like letting loose on them [the Alia Surat soldiers] with her Widow Bites but she had to play nice. She always had to play damn nice’ (p. 122). This is where she starts to understand the power and appropriate place of affective learning in determining the whole sort of person she wants to be. Her affect teaches her what is *right* and she uses that knowledge to utilize her other talents to help in the best way she can. She realizes she doesn’t want to be like Sussler, unaffected by the casualties of the Indigenous people. She learns that she wants to care (claiming a part of her femininity that isn’t

controlled or permitted by the patriarchy, which will be gone into Chapter 3 as well). At the end of the novel, Natasha is able to apply this newfound learning to her interactions with Bruce, in particular, the Hulk. Instead of her tactical side dominating her decisions, her affect makes her realize that they are both simply scared. Also, her increased familiarity with Bruce has reduced her fear, something her critical side wouldn't let her see until she lets down her defences in front of him:

She held out her hand to him. 'I'm scared too,' she whispered, walking forward until she could practically feel the heat radiating off his skin. 'Believe me, I am. I always am.' A smile slipped across her face at the familiarity of her sentence. 'But we don't have to be scared of each other. Not anymore.' (p. 229)

The increased familiarity helps reduce Natasha's fear, allowing her affect and empathy to take over.

This arc is mirrored in Deborah's journey as she learns more about Desiree, with both characters—Natasha and Deborah—learning to see past the 'monster' to reality. Whereas Natasha struggles with her own feelings, Desiree has a superhuman connection to the feelings of others. She is the ultimate empath, able to take on someone's feelings and remove their pain as they die. She wants to create an affective connection with the Alia Surat soldiers, knowing the power of the heart to create understanding of another point of view. This was strongly exhibited when she helps a white soldier die peacefully: '*In turn, I felt his utter confusion. I didn't feel hatred or rage*' (p. 209). She realizes that hatred is often bred from lack of empathy and that racism is born from lack of knowledge and familiarity.

Desiree's *modus operandi* is using open honesty and empathy to connect with people. She believes that is the way to 'win' a fight, often to the chagrin of her best friend, Robin. However, this behaviour confounds Natasha, whose *modus operandi* is to win through manipulation and 'strength', as coded by the patriarchy. When she first meets Desiree, Natasha treats her as an enemy, holding Desiree at gunpoint. However, Desiree doesn't let this deter her and instead, sees a goodness inside Natasha. She attempts to reach out to it with her usual softness and positivity: "'Please,'" she begged. "Believe me when I say, I'm only trying to save them.'" (p. 157). Natasha knows she can technically win this battle with Desiree, having the power to take Desiree prisoner. But Natasha recognizes that isn't a victory. Through Desiree

reaching out and forming a connection with Natasha, Natasha listens and learns about the real circumstances of Alia Surat's people. She can no longer ignore the evidence before her because Desiree is no longer a faceless monster she must defeat; instead, Natasha sees Desiree as a fellow human being and can't help but identify and empathize with her fight for freedom. This is the only way Desiree wins Natasha's support and Natasha goes against all of her patriarchal programming to help Desiree and the Nhuungku 'terrorist' group. In the end, it is Desiree's strength, which is typically coded as feminine, that wins the battle with Natasha. Desiree opens up Natasha to recognizing the value of her own feelings and empathy.

This point links into the unremarked Whiteness later, showing how I'm attempting to help people see past racial framing and become aware of their own gaze. Because Deborah and Desiree's journey is centred on acknowledging the White Gaze to increase understanding and empathy, rather than learning to affectively read the situation, I will save that craft analysis for Chapter 3, which concentrates on the interventions I am making in the fan studies area.

In conclusion, I found the most effective way to create an affective learning experience for my reader was to model it through my characters. Jalongo (2020) talks about how fundamental storytelling is in which 'human beings process and share events as well as the feelings surrounding those experiences'. Robert Ward (2018) uses character therapy in which people, usually children, converse with characters and use them to overcome traumas or empathize with characters outside of their experience. Natasha is having the experience that I hope readers will mirror, learning to empathize with people who have different experiences and realize her own understanding is limited. As Albers (2016, p. 1) says, quoting scholar Louise Rosenblatt, 'we understand ourselves through the lives of characters in stories' and other, unique ways to engage in social interactions. So, seeing Natasha go through these emotions and shifts in the way she conducts herself and views her actions, readers will hopefully automatically identify with this character and start to imitate her. My research has demonstrated again and again that character identification is of primary importance in creating an affective learning. And of course, this links to my own experience with *Iron Man 3* (2013). It wasn't the plot which caused my revelations; it was the character of Tony Stark and his journey, which I unwittingly mimicked at the time.

2.7. Five Things I Learned Plus One in Chapter 2

1. **Do focus on character.** Empathy comes from engagement with a character.
2. **Do know what you want that character to learn.** What the character learns, the reader may copy.
3. **Do utilize comfort when breaking down a character.** The *comfort* aspect of hurt/comfort has been shown to be popular and soothing to readers, even while reading about hard topics.
4. **Do emphasize positive group dynamics.** The warmth amongst characters creates an intimacy that the reader can witness and hopefully, feel involved in.
5. **Do show domesticity when inviting an affective learning.** Seeing characters in settings readers are familiar with can create more of an intimacy between characters and readers.
+
6. **Don't create strong female characters by inverting coded male characteristics.** Female characters should show their power in their own individual right.

2.8. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have defined three ways of affectively engaging in a text (response, attachment and learning) and how I used these to structure my creative project, *Avengers: The Privileged Few*. While this study hasn't addressed reader reception (i.e., how effective my techniques have been), it has demonstrated the basis of my approach in creating a hybridized fan fiction novel. In the next chapter, I will look at a second distinguishing feature of fan fiction which has consistently inspired me: its ability to make interventions in an existing canon.

Chapter 3: Interventions by an Aboriginal Feminist

3.1. Introduction

Fan fiction is often framed as a resistant act. Jenkins (1992, p. 23), in his foundational study of fandom, *Textual Poachers*, says: 'Fans construct their cultural and social identity through borrowing and inflecting mass culture images, articulating concerns which often go unvoiced within the dominant media'. Jenkins (1992, pp. 26-27) says how fans often mine texts for the parts they need to tell the stories not often shown or acknowledged in society and leave the parts behind they found unpalatable. These stories were often categorized as resistant or disruptive in nature because they confronted the status quo. Derecho (2006, pp. 66-67) acknowledges this link between disruptive fan texts and women's writing where feminists used fan fiction approximately in the 1700s to call out sexist and misogynist behaviours rampant in books and society. Derecho (2006, p. 76) categorises many forms of fan fiction (like ones that exposed homophobia and sexism) to be an act of social resistance. Hellekson and Busse (2006, p. 22), along with Una McCormack, also point at the reparation/reparative paradigm fan fiction uses to examine subjects relevant to society but not often represented on the big screen. Fan fiction is known for filling in the gaps, or writing in the margins, for a reason. Camille Bacon-Smith (1991) documents the horror and backlash many women received in the 1980s for writing slash fan fiction when gay and lesbian relationships were considered taboo subjects. On top of it, they were being written by *women*: another explosive disruption. Nancy Baym (1999, p. 15) also acknowledges how fan fiction has been used as a form of resistance by women from a patriarchal society. In her study of fandoms and soap opera, Baym (1999) discovered how women often used their fandom passions and friendships as empowerment to leave abusive relationships. These textbooks gave me ideas of how fan fiction can be used to empower and bring the invisible visible.

But fan fiction isn't always as transformative as it could be. Willis (2006, p. 154) talks about how always categorizing slash and femslash fan fiction as resistant to mainstream text is a problem in and of itself. LGBTQ+ representation should not be considered disruptive to mainstream media and to categorise fan fiction as still resistant for its representation begins to look problematic. Fathallah (2017, p. 12) also

acknowledges how the transformative and resistant aspect of fan fiction sometimes conforms to the very things it thinks it is subverting. This is exhibited perfectly in a brilliant essay by Catherine Duchastel de Montrouge (2019). While she talks about the often hard-hitting subversiveness of fan fiction when it comes to gender and sexuality, de Montrouge (2019) points out that fan fiction spaces have been less forgiving of disruptive forces surrounding disability and racism, which she says even often devalues characters of colour, reproducing, not intervening, into mainstream media. While she says there are ‘pockets of resistance’ (2019, p. 1) within fan fiction communities and stories that effectively intervene and represent disability, she often does not find the stories transgress against the status quo of racism and how a white, able-bodied person is often portrayed as the perfect stand-in of a fan and of romantic interests in the stories. Quoting Fazekas, Dechastel de Montrouge (2019, p. 1) says:

She [Angela Fazekas] also addresses the problems Black fans and fans who are POC encounter when trying to challenge racism in fanfiction or fans' reproduction of racist tropes in fanfic. She argues that because fanfiction is perceived by (white) fans both as a subversive and transgressive practice by/for women and queer people against the heteropatriarchal mainstream, critiques of racism in fanfiction communities or slash are perceived as an attack on fanfiction itself by these same white fans. (Dechastel de Montrouge, 2019, p. 1)

She (2019, p. 1) concludes that fan fiction, while still wonderfully subversive and disruptive, could look at turning those ideologies inwards, investigating its own practices, problematic discourses (like the denial of White Privilege) and how inclusive the space is to *all* parties, rather than just some.

How, then, have these concepts of transgression and disruption helped form my own forms of intervention? My creative work aims, as Urcaregui (2018, p. 46) says, to use a fan space to politically engage and promote social change. In this chapter, I will contextualise the two main areas of interventions I explore within the MCU, focusing on Aboriginal history, Aboriginal ways of knowing, and Indigifuturism on the one hand, and the intersectionality of coloured feminism and a critique of unremarked Whiteness. Having developed a conceptual framework for these interventions, I will turn to an analysis of my own novel to demonstrate how these interventions were made.

3.2. Aboriginal history, Aboriginal ways of knowing and Indigi-Futurism

Growing up, I wasn't always aware of what it was to be an Aboriginal woman in Australia. Sometimes people would look at me differently. As I have grown older, my awareness has changed. I fear police, fear the consequences of claiming my Aboriginality, fear judgment if I defy expectations of stereotypes and fear judgment if I appear to conform to a stereotype. I often feel a pressure to perform just as I often felt under scrutiny growing up, having to be aware and opinionated on adult topics long before I was an adult.

There are many incidents that stick in my mind long after they have happened, but I'll only share one of them here. When I attended my Honours graduation in 2015, I was wearing a cultural sash over my graduation robe. I attended a cultural ceremony before the graduation ceremony with two other Aboriginal students. I felt so proud to be part of it and proud of the mental health issues I had lived with to be there that day to get my Honours degree. As I sat in the auditorium waiting for the degrees to be awarded, a woman ducked over to me, asking, 'Excuse me, but what is your extra sash all about? Is it for an extra award or something?'

I happily explained it was about acknowledging my Aboriginal heritage and culture.

She blinked at me, burst into laughter, said, 'I thought you were so much more special than that,' and walked off, leaving me frozen on the chair. Here I was, so proud of all my accomplishments and what I'd survived to be there, only to have them diminished and insulted at my very own graduation.

I share this story here to model a pedagogical approach to Aboriginal ways of knowing. Story sharing and personal experience are huge parts of our tradition of learning (Lorina, 2019). This approach emphasises the importance of my own lived experience as an Aboriginal woman and what I can use to inform and inspire my academic writing. It also incorporates what I learn from my community, my elders. Recognising and incorporating my own viewpoint also foregrounds how my lived experience as an Aboriginal person has informed my novel and my writing of Indigenous characters Desiree and the rest of the Nhuungku group. In writing this novel, it has been important to me to value the Indigenous viewpoint, recognizing that my voice adds to the growing diaspora of Aboriginal writers, who are still

underrepresented when it comes to superhero stories, let alone within the MCU (at least before *Black Panther*, 2018).

The violent colonisation of Australia, the history of which informs my interventions into the MCU, is still difficult for me to write about. To the First Nations population (and many others), the 26th of January, 1788 is known as Invasion Day. It became the start of what is known as the Frontier Wars (despite adamant arguments from some historians that there was no war, something *Avengers: The Privileged Few* gives a nod to). Defined as a war or not, many Indigenous people were massacred. According to the ground-breaking Killing Times map in *The Guardian* (Allam and Evershed, 2019; and Allam, O'Mahoney and Nadel, 2019) approximately 97% of people murdered were Aboriginal men, women and children. The depravity of many of the attacks is evident within books like *Talkin' Up to The White Woman* (Moreton-Robinson, 2000), recounting how Aboriginal babies' heads were used for golf. This gives an idea of the 'birth' of Australia and the systemic devastation and oppression enacted upon the Indigenous nations. The origins of Australia as a nation are breezed over in *Avengers: The Privileged Few* when Natasha says, "It was colonized a few hundred years ago and considered a third-world country" (p. 96). The rich history of Aboriginal Australia is written off as unimportant and the mass murder and imported disease euphemised into one word: colonization.

The twentieth century saw numerous commissions into Aboriginal people and the abuse they suffered. Arguably one of the most important reports is the Moseley (1935) report. Full of racist and stereotypical language indicative of the barbaric thinking at play, Moseley (1935, p. 3) argued that the 'half-castes' of the Aboriginal people needed to be trained as fast as possible and assimilated into white society, a policy which would be implemented by the new organisation of the Divisional Protectors because the 'native is naturally lazy' (Moseley, 1935, p. 4). Markovich (2003, p. 1) rejects the sickening claim that the Stolen Generation was done with the best of intentions on the part of the government. The purpose of these discriminating policies was to extinguish a culture, dehumanize human beings and try to 'train' Indigenous people to be useful to a white society that he believed to be superior.

Reports and studies now show that Aboriginal children within this Stolen Generation suffered horrible abuse while being 'trained' and 'saved' from their families and culture. This abuse included beltings, molestation, rape and much else

(Australian Human Rights Commission 1997, p. 1). It is significant that the degradation took place not in their original homes but where they had been placed to be trained. The treatment was deplorable and shows that the statements and recommendations from the Moseley (1935) report were completely false as well as consisting of extremely racist thinking (Australian Human Rights Commission 1997). I allude to this history in *Avengers: The Privileged Few* when Desiree's backstory is slowly revealed, showing she was stolen from her mother. While it is never specified, one would assume she was severely abused because of her refusal to allow other children to suffer the trauma she did.

Unfortunately, the abuse of power from government and law institutions did not halt along with the Stolen Generation (whose practices did not stop until as late until the 1970s). Aboriginal deaths in custody became a term well-used in Australia amongst the community. An Aboriginal death in custody is where an Aboriginal person dies while within police gaol cells, prison or simply police custody in general. My Honours thesis addressed this subject and while I do not have the space to detail it, it is important to note that despite 1,400 deaths recorded since 1980, no policemen have ever been convicted of manslaughter or murder in relation to these deaths (Cuddihy, 2013, p. 1).

The past commissions and current studies provide a foundation behind the ideas of the abuse of power institutions in *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, but the Intervention, the modern-day Stolen Generation (which I will expand on momentarily) is what forms most of the premise for the novel. It shows the cyclical nature of treatment and abuse of power still at play, keeping racist treatment and suffering of Aboriginal people alive. Despite many black-led initiatives to talk about issues of poverty, neglect and abuse in some communities in the Northern Territory, none were given any notice until the white-led report, *Little Children Are Sacred* (Graham, 2017). The LCAS report made sure to specify that this alleged abuse and neglect was not only an Aboriginal problem and there were many Indigenous communities unaffected by such issues. Despite these points, the Howard Government took no notice. On 21st July 2007, the Racial Discrimination Act was suspended and the government, with the help of the army, launched an invasion against 73 Northern Territory Aboriginal communities (Graham, 2017).

Chris Graham, along with an investigative team of Amy McQuire and Brian Johnstone, were instrumental in breaking down the lies perpetrated by the media that

enabled the government to launch a new policy that would create more black suffering. *Lateline* and ABC set the stage of lies of paedophilic rings run by Aboriginal men and cultural law, protecting known elderly abusers and holding sex slaves. All these sensational claims were proved unequivocally false by Graham and his team (2017). But the truth did not matter and the Intervention went ahead, with the Howard government implementing 'mandatory' health checks for children; or, as Graham (2017, p. 1) points out, the 'legal rape of children'. Perche (2017) also acknowledges the horror and ethics surrounding the mandatory health checks. The practices implemented against Aboriginal people because of the Intervention have not stopped. It chillingly resembles old mission policies and the Stolen Generations. Aboriginal children are once again being forcibly removed from their family and culture, with children in out-of-home care quadrupling, while non-Indigenous children in out-of-home care has lessened (Gibson, 2017). Both Gibson (2017) and Graham (2017) point out the huge rise in Aboriginal incarceration despite the proof that the alleged paedophilic rings never existed and the abuse faced by the women and children wasn't only grossly exaggerated, but in many cases, didn't exist at all. Former Human Rights commissioner Gillian Triggs (Zhou, 2019) has long called for the end of the Northern Territory Intervention, pointing out that the Intervention Act is in breach of human rights; not to mention it has been a 'crushing' failure of the discriminatory policy from the beginning until now and strongly contributed towards the 500% rise in Indigenous youth suicide rates since 2007-2011. So overall, Aboriginal law suspended; punitive and discriminatory measures taken against alcohol and pornography that would be unthinkable in a white community; continued forced removal of children; suspended community programs (removing self-determination); revoking of Aboriginal land ownership; and wasted money to build the infrastructure and housing promised by the government and asked for by the community are just a few of the results of the Intervention (Graham, 2017; Gibson, 2017; Zhou, 2017). On top of that, it is not going to stop. The Gillard government extended the practices of the Intervention all the way until 2022, under the ironically titled Stronger Futures in the Northern Territory Act (Zhou, 2017). Stronger for whom we might ask.

But Indigenous women have resourcefully opposed these policies. In a fight against the current removals, Grandmothers Against Removals (GMAR) was formed by Indigenous women to articulate the racial charge and injustice behind these

removals. Founded by Aunty Hazel Collins, GMAR's aim is not just about highlighting the 'mispractice of child welfare officials', but helping mothers raise awareness of the continued forced removals country-wide (Verass, n.d., p. 1). With sometimes no answers given as to why the removals are happening, GMAR helps the mothers deal with the repeated trauma and try to get the children back (Verass, n.d.). Gregoire (2018, p. 1) describes these continued horrific practices of child removal as the 'ongoing stolen generation' and states, when describing Kevin Rudd's apology and the *Bringing Them Home* report, 'Sorry means not doing it again'.

The systemic and institutional racism continues to haunt our government's policies and the children and women who they claim to be protecting are the very people who are suffering. It also has a depressingly circular pattern, pressing the question of how far the treatment of Indigenous people has come and how many policies are truly *past*, with the similarly repressive control of Indigenous settlements in the present day and the current forced removal of children with abuse happening in care.

This current Intervention of the children and the reaction from the strong powerful women of the Aboriginal community forms the basis of the plot in *Avengers: The Privileged Few*. It is no coincidence that the main people present in the suspected 'terrorist group' are women, who have saved their and others' children from being stolen. The word for the 'terrorist group', Nhuungku, means, in my Barkindji language, 'women'. I hope for this novel to be part of a growing diaspora of texts by Indigenous authors, acknowledging the breadth of identity and the struggles which can come with them. I hope my text will contribute to it in an original way, growing understanding, support and maybe even action in the long run towards reducing colonizing practices.

As I have mentioned, *Black Panther* (2018) offered a radical alternative model within the MCU. Part of its success came through Afrofuturism, a cultural aesthetic that links the diaspora of African culture and history with contemporary technology (Dery et al., 1993). *Black Panther* (2018) showed a land untouched by colonization and what a different future could be created. The success of *Black Panther* (2018) interested me in including some Indigi-futurism (defined by Whitepigeon, 2020, p. 1, as 'a growing movement... where Native peoples dare to reimagine societal tropes, alternative histories and futures through the exploration of science fiction and its sub-genres') in my novel to show a form of hope for what could be in the future for

Indigenous generations (incorporating a happy ending I so often crave in stories I read, write and watch). Because of the present state of affairs, I still feel it may be disingenuous to shoe-horn a happy ending into my project. So, it ends in the middle: with a hint of hope for the future of the stolen children but without an easy resolution for the current generation who are left in darkness.

3.3. Postcolonial Fan Fiction or Decolonization?

Since starting my PhD, I have become more and more hesitant to classify the Creative section as postcolonial. In this section, I will define my understanding of postcolonial theory, why I moved away from it and why I classify *Avengers: The Privileged Few* as decolonizing.

Elam (2019, p. 1) defines postcolonial theory as ‘a body of thought primarily concerned with accounting for the political, aesthetic, economic, historical, and social impact of European colonial rule around the world’. Daozhi (2016, p. 193) then moves onto how Australian literature incorporates postcolonialism, believing landscape often maintains a centre role. Daozhi (2016, p. 193) argues that this landscape focus implicates, in Australian history that started with the invasion, the ‘territorial disputes between colonizers and colonized, marked by ongoing struggle, negotiation and re-inscription.’

I believe the key word here is ‘ongoing’. Daozhi (2016, p. 193), quoting Bernard Smith, said this continued colonial oppression of Aboriginal people is enabled by the ‘mechanics of forgetfulness’, or as I would say, a type of willful ignorance. This is where postcolonialism comes in, attempting to decolonize narratives and challenge the forgetful discourse (Daozhi 2016). Elam (2019, p. 1) adds that most postcolonial theory is interested in the ‘lingering forms of colonial power’ and that in no way does the prefix of ‘post’ imply colonisation has come to an end. Though at the same time, Elam (2019, p. 1) does acknowledge that the addition of ‘post’ has been rigorously debated.

Interestingly, Elam (2019, p. 1) does expand on how postcolonial theories can be used to not only imagine a world after colonialism, but ‘one which has yet to come into existence’. It could be argued that *Black Panther* (2018) does the latter, showing Wakanda as a thriving nation in many thanks to escaping the European colonisation. In this case though, it is an imaginative exercise of seeing what life would have been

like in nations untouched by colonisation, which I could more easily understand being described as postcolonial literature.

However, the current treatment of Indigenous people in Australia makes clearer why I am concerned by using the term of ‘postcolonial’ fan fiction. Postcolonialism *implies* a past practice that is being examined, in ‘post’, despite the caveat Elam (2019) adds about the prefix. Mishra & Hodge (2005, pp. 375-376) defines postcolonialism as a (sometimes literary, sometimes critical theory) framework used to examine characters, plots or issues through the lens of how the story and characters are being affected by *past* colonial practices. Mishra & Hodge (2005, p. 376) agree that a historical sense has been far too extensively implemented in colonialism for the ‘recently emancipated’. Even in Elam’s (2019, p. 1) examination of postcolonial literature and definition, he still refers to the colonial practices as ‘lingering’.

Therein the problem becomes more apparent. With the circular policies and present treatment of Indigenous people, how can I say the Creative side of my PhD is a *postcolonial* text? These are not lingering effects from past colonial practices, but events like the Intervention show a clear use of colonial power against First Nations people still in the present day, along with the deaths in custody with a lack of fair investigations.

Poka Laenui (2006) poignantly lays out the five stages of colonization as well as a decolonization process which is as follows: Rediscovery and Recovery; Mourning; Dreaming; Commitment and Action. I believe the Uluru Statement from the Heart (Davis 2018) was an attempt at the Mourning and Dreaming processes. If it had not been so rudely turned away, perhaps the government could have moved towards Commitment and even Action. But, with a refusal of acknowledgement of sovereignty, continued removal of children, and neglect of duties when Indigenous people are abused by power institutions, it is hard to see a country moving on from colonisation.

While such wonderful organisations and powerful people like the GMAR movement are certainly creating Action, we cannot get here alone, especially when some government institutions refuse to give up archaic colonial practices. And, as Laenui (2006, p. 6) points out, Action cannot be achieved without ‘a consensus of commitment reached in the 4th phase’.

So, while the Creative side of this PhD is an attempt to examine and draw attention to colonial practices in society which go unnoticed, as well as unchecked, I do not believe it can be classified as a *postcolonial* text. Professionally (and personally), I do not think it is right or adequate.

I believe it is important to acknowledge the racial positions and experience I am centring in my Creative text, especially within fan studies, and begin the decolonization process of texts where the racial identity is invisible or unacknowledged. Rebecca Wanzo (2015, p. 1), in reference to the African American experience within fandoms, suggests bringing identity hermeneutics further into focus, making visible fans of colour and, in the process, those different concerns to light as well. While Wanzo (2015) is referring to the African American identity hermeneutics, this can be also used in Indigenous studies, removing the alterity around racial fan identity and experience. It is an acknowledgement of the black experience inside and outside of the text, making the invisible visible, while simultaneously involving the reader to see through another Gaze they have not experienced before.

So, while my novel takes place in a decolonizing discourse, taking apart the thoughts, ideas and policies that are part of colonization, I still would not classify it as postcolonial. More, I would think of it as practicing decolonization. But it is part of a growing diaspora of texts by Indigenous authors, acknowledging the breadth of identity and the struggles which can come with them.

3.4. Intersectionality, Coloured Feminism, and Unremarked Whiteness

Imagine you are a woman in an abusive relationship. Your grandmother and mother are working to get you away from your abuser, but each time you leave, you find a reason to come back. Finally, you find it in yourself to ring the police, to let yourself be helped in this terrifying and painful situation, knowing it is still fraught with danger, for you and your family. Imagine that when you ring the police, rather than getting help, you are taken to a cell because of some parking fines. Imagine as you double-over in pain from your broken rib that your partner gave you, that you scream for help until the pain makes you vomit. Imagine that this goes on for three days, your pain written off as behavioural problems and your begging falls on deaf ears. Imagine

dying on the floor from septicaemia and pneumonia with the police surrounding you, not helping you, even though that is why you called them in the first place.

I know these images are confronting but while my portrayal uses the tools of fiction, of storytelling, the narrative itself is grounded in reality. Unfortunately, this was the experience of 22-year-old Julieka Dhu (Langton, 2016; Mayes, 2016; NITV, 2016). Marcia Langton (2016, p. 1) recounts the chilling details in which the police officers and health care workers treated Ms. Dhu. Despite her grandmother's work to get justice for Ms. Dhu's heartless and pointless death, no police or health care worker has been held accountable for their lack of care or the racism permeating their actions (Langton, 2016, p. 1). Langton draws attention to how the lives of Aboriginal women are treated often as a hindrance or hassle, how they are often treated with contempt, as if they are causing trouble by simply existing and asking for help that is readily offered to the rest of society. The implications of her work are clear: a black woman's life is less valued by the systems in place.

When I first decided to write from my viewpoint as an Aboriginal woman in Australia, I wondered how to divide the two issues of feminism and blackness. Aileen Moreton-Robinson's (2000) iconic work *Talkin' Up To The White Woman* as well as the essays within *Gender and the Superhero Narrative* (Goodrum, Prescott and Smith, 2018) showed me the best approach was not to divide race and gender. The power systems that keep racism and sexism a current issue are intertwined and intersectional. For example, Moreton-Robinson (2000) explores how black women have often been excluded from the conversation of feminism, showing how the topics of race and gender combine. She examines the violence enacted upon the bodies of women of colour and the need to acknowledge that feminism does not always capture the black experience. The story of Julieka Dhu which I recounted illuminates the additional layer of violence and unequal systems Aboriginal women have to navigate.

The intersectionality of race and feminism offers a useful framework to understand the interplay of these issues. Intersectionality acknowledges the complexity of a black woman's experience while understanding the institutions that often uphold these problematic frameworks will complement each other. At the same time, because my approach is also grounded in Aboriginal ways of knowing, it is important for me to acknowledge that these experiences are unique to individuals. My work explores and develops from my own experience, which may not be representative of what other black women have experienced.

3.5. Kimberlé Crenshaw and Intersectionality

I cannot go any further before pausing and looking at Kimberlé Crenshaw's phenomenal work on intersectionality, which helped form a basis for my study and expansion into the use of the term, coloured feminism.

Crenshaw's study concentrates on the violence perpetuated against black female bodies (mostly concentrating on intracommunity violence), showing the importance of intersectionality when looking at the lives of women of colour. In defining the need for intersectionality, Crenshaw (1991, p. 1,252) says:

The failure of feminism to interrogate race means that the resistance strategies of feminism will often replicate and reinforce the subordination of people of color, and the failure of antiracism to interrogate patriarchy means that antiracism will frequently reproduce the subordination of women.

This definition captures the failure of the two schools of thought through its exclusivity to address the issues that comes for people who have intersecting identities.

Concentrating particularly on intracommunity violence, Crenshaw (1991, p. 1,256) illustrates the impossible position women of colour⁴ are put in faced with domestic violence perpetrated by black males: 'People of color often must weigh their interests in avoiding issues that might reinforce distorted public perceptions against the need to acknowledge and address intracommunity problems.' Through this examination, Crenshaw (1991) also captures the fear of repercussion women of colour feel that comes when inviting the White Gaze into a black community. For many years, Indigenous elders wanted to address incidents of intracommunity violence in some Aboriginal communities and apply community-based approaches to help. However, instead, the *Little Children are Sacred* report happened with no input from the Indigenous communities it was reporting on; on top of that, the report was then manipulated by the government as well as media outlets to allow another Stolen Generation and once again become the perpetrators of mass violence. It is no wonder women of colour shy away from making intracommunity issues public, because they

⁴ Crenshaw (1991) stresses that this study is centred on African American women and acknowledges that the statistics of First Nations women would be different again.

are used as ammunition to further subjugate these communities rather than help. This helps illuminate the importance of intersectionality, outlining how crucial both schools of thought should work together when tackling issues that women of colour face.

Crenshaw (1991), like Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000), point out how the generations of subjugation continue to affect women of colour. Women of colour have been (and still sometimes are) stripped of their voices as leaders of the community and instead, white women attempt to talk for them, using an essentialist approach that does not take into consideration at all a Black woman's needs, and also, ignoring the subjugation by white women themselves of Black female bodies. This has been the line of emphasis I have taken within my PhD, concentrating on the attempted subjugation by white women, which is illustrated through the interactions of Desiree and Deborah. This is another reason why I felt coloured feminism was an appropriate term to use, emphasising the intersectionality of Black women and how they are acted upon by white women in particular. Also, for me, the term, coloured feminism, helps keep the focus on Black women, not the sexual racism impacted upon black men (even though that is obviously another huge issue with how the Indigenous community is unfairly portrayed, but one that was not the concentration of my PhD). I also wanted to move away from the notion that black women are basically only victims to black men. We are also vulnerable to sexism and violence from white women and white men (in particularly police officers, which adds another layer of fear). Using coloured feminism as analysis gives room to look at what black women go through from not just one source, but the multitudinous avenues and discriminations we face.

Also, feminism on its own, like Crenshaw (1991, p. 1,280) acknowledges, fails to take into account the traditional lives of First Nations women and inflicts the White Gaze onto Indigenous society. Because Indigenous women do not fit into the 'traditional' white lives that is considered 'normal', they are often automatically 'Othered', not acknowledging that white feminists can be judging Black culture by white laws. A prime example of this is in Pilkington-Garimara's famous text, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996, pp. 25-26). When the Indigenous women first come onto the cattle station, they are completely nude. These women weren't being 'promiscuous' (a sexist concept as is, but they would have easily been judged as such in the early 1900s); in their culture, clothes meant nothing. Yet, judged by a White

Gaze, these women would have been seen as ‘tempting’ men when this had nothing to do with men, white or otherwise, and all to do with culture.

All of this begins to capture the struggles that women of colour go through in a sexist and racist world. Through the institutional racism in white systems, Indigenous women face two types of violence while also having said violence dismissed by institutions still steeped in colonial practices and thinking. Crenshaw (1991) captures this horrifying balance of each identity being played against the other when intersectionality of the black female experience is ignored. Crenshaw’s (1991, p. 1,287) case study of the persecution of the African American music group, 2 Live Crew, showcases the heart of the struggle between racism and sexism, as well as the impact on black communities. While women of colour can report black men for violence, the laws outside of community, the systems still imbued with institutional racism, may pursue them unfairly, placing the men at further danger from police violence as well as isolating women from their communities for inviting the White Gaze within. Therein shows how racism causes black women to mute themselves for fear and repercussion from white society as well as black communities, suffering from misogyny and sexual violence not only from white bodies, but black ones as well. Women of colour are once again forgotten, because not only are they devalued for their colour and culture, they are devalued as women. And the only reason the white women are more valued in the scenarios that Crenshaw (1991) presents is because they are seen as a possession for white men and will be devalued if touched by black skin, highlighting the sexism still at play, along with the ever-present racism. This shows how much intersectionality is needed and how women of colour will continue to suffer if systems do not stop using one line of thinking to benefit one school of people.

This brings me full circle as to why I believe the term, coloured feminism, is useful when reclaiming narratives, a notion also emphasised in Crenshaw’s (1991) work, an empowerment in categorization. As I mentioned in the Introduction to my thesis, fan fiction is often used to reclaim narratives and words that have previously been used to ‘Other’ and subjugate minorities (hence the use of the word ‘intervention’ throughout my thesis). This was also the reason for using ‘coloured’. Early on in Crenshaw’s (1991, p. 1,280) article, there is a mention of juries not believing women of colour with a very specific quote from a white juror who says, ““Negroes have a way of not telling the truth. They've a knack for coloring the story.

So you know you can't believe everything they say.” Somehow, ‘coloured’ is seen as inherently evil and untruthful. I would like to reclaim the word, showing that this is only perpetuated through a White Gaze, but when actually brought front and centre, it is showing and embracing a Black women’s experience, an important and far too often overlooked viewpoint. Crenshaw (1991, p. 1,297) adds:

Clearly, there is unequal power, but there is nonetheless some degree of agency that people can and do exert in the politics of naming. And it is important to note that identity continues to be a site of resistance for members of different subordinated groups.

For me, it is also about bringing the two identities to the forefront: Blackness (in this case, Indigenous women of Australia) and feminism. To have both named, it shows an equality between the two, that both are not only essential for understanding an Aboriginal woman’s experience, but perhaps changing it.

3.6. Unremarked Whiteness in the MCU (and the Superhero Genre)

Before the landmark introduction of *Black Panther* in 2018, the MCU had failed to acknowledge its bias toward whiteness and white Western ideologies. This was most evident to me while viewing *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). When Wakandan humanitarian workers are accidentally killed in the Lagos mission at the beginning of the film, the UN assembles to form the Sokovian Accords. One of the main aims of the Sokovian Accords is for countries to protect themselves during Avenger missions, essentially, not allowing the Avengers to cross borders without the individual country’s permissions and support in hopes of better protecting their own citizens. This is particularly supported by T’Chaka, the then leader of Wakanda, a black nation.

Of course, the logic of the superhero genre tends to favour imperialist outlooks and heroic autonomy above all else. Chris Gavalier (2014) examines the very first iterations of superheroes in Britain and how they embraced the imperialistic viewpoints, a form of support for the colonial practices of the British empire. As the UK began to distance itself from its colonial past, feeling a sense of shame, Gavalier (2014) shows how the US stepped in, embracing the imperialist origins of superheroes and expanding on them. Gavalier (2014, p. 2) points out how, through the superhero’s alternate identity, the superhero ‘absorbs elements of the racial other, disturbing but

not overthrowing the imperial binary as a dual identity character who uses otherness to maintain the empire'. Gavalier (2014) shows the trend of how the superhero discovers his powers from Other sources (whether from non-Western countries or alien) and uses those powers to keep the status quo. While the superhero has a freedom to do what he wants, it is all to benefit the people, so in the end, the Other aspect of the superhero is celebrated. But for the benefit of *what* people is really the question? Gavalier (2014, p. 3) says that the way the superhero takes from other cultures to advance white civilizations buys into Edward Said's argument of 'frozen culture' or 'arrested development' that the Oriental lens perceives of the Other. In other words, those who are not white are stuck in a limbo and they cannot advance any further without White intervention. This is where the superhero steps in, taking the powerful knowledge of the Oriental or Indigenous peoples, but using it much better than they ever could, therefore, becoming the *superhero*. This isn't necessarily what authors of comic books are trying to do or reiterate but these are the foundations that the superhero genre was built on and so therefore, still has some of the colonizing overtones that can make some of its storylines or characters problematic.

This thought of White superiority links into the behaviour of Captain America in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). In the film, the Sokovian Records are portrayed as evil, a needlessly restrictive act of government which attempts to control the Avengers. Steve Rogers, a.k.a. *Captain America*, refused to sign the Accords and insisted instead it was important for him to maintain his autonomy. The narrative gives very little space to an argument in favour of the autonomy of other countries, in this case, Wakanda, which suffered tragic casualties. In response, Steve Rogers says, 'This job, we try to save as many people as we can. Sometimes that doesn't mean everybody. But if we can't find a way to live with that, then next time maybe nobody gets saved' (*Captain America: Civil War* 2016). This sounds very familiar: the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few. This approach becomes more problematic when it is understood Rogers is referring to civilians who did not sign up to be part of the fight, a fact further compounded as the movie gives authority to a white American to decide when and how he will cross over borders, regardless of what the sovereign black leader (T'Chaka) requests. As evidenced earlier, this appears to be a white male behaving as if his viewpoint is superior and that his decisions are about advancement, when in fact, it furthers a colonial standpoint that the white male knows better than a black country's leader.

It is unsurprising that the deficiencies of this political act are never explored within the movie nor indeed are they ever coded as being particularly problematic. As Moreton-Robinson argues, ‘Silence about whiteness sustains the exercise of that power’ (2000, p. XI). The movie—and indeed the universe—clearly constructs Captain America as the pinnacle of righteousness, his Whiteness never recognised or acknowledged in the exchange. If he makes a decision, it is purely for honour and all the right reasons. We, as viewers, are meant to have faith that he knows better than a black country’s own leader. But when I watched this movie, the tensions were starkly visible. All I could see was a white figure refusing to respect a black country’s border. As the history of Australia can show, the lack of respect of a people’s country resulted in genocide, slavery, stolen wages and stolen children. This was undergirded by a similar principle: that a colonising white nation knew how to use this land and run Indigenous affairs better than its original inhabitants. Steve Rogers did not set out to commit genocide but the unacknowledged racial tensions within the movie make it deeply troubling.

A rich field of scholarship has investigated the set of dynamics which *Captain America* inadvertently portrays. Robin DiAngelo (2011, p. 56) examines the invisibility of whiteness yet how it permeates every aspect of society and institutions. DiAngelo (2011, p. 56) and Moreton-Robinson (2000) explore how many white people do not want to admit that their superior position and people of colour’s sometimes poverty is a result of institutional abuse and slavery. These inequalities have (and sometimes continue to) balance the scales in the White direction. DiAngelo (2000, p. 56) says, ‘Whiteness Studies begin with the premise that racism and white privilege exist in both traditional and modern forms, and rather than work to prove its existence, work to reveal it.’ Steve Rogers’ Whiteness is there in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016); viewers are just not narratively encouraged to see it, let alone question it. Moreton-Robinson (2000, XIX) makes the point that ‘Whiteness remains the invisible omnipresent norm. As long as whiteness remains invisible in analyses “race” is the prison reserved for the “Other”’. Chad Barbour (2015, p. 8) writes an interesting article about the appropriation Captain America’s character does to Native American culture in certain comics and how ‘[T]hrough absorption of Indianness, and the aid of a black helper, Captain America becomes even more “American” due to his incorporation of an “authentic” native identity’. While this appropriates Native American culture, it also insults and minimizes it, making it as simple as putting on a

headdress to be considered 'authentic'. While Barbour (2015, p. 12) acknowledges how many comic book writers have tried to challenge and examine Captain America's inherent whiteness, Barbour believes one cannot ignore 'the fact that Captain America is a white man meant to represent multiple ethnicities and races in his role as America's protector and hero'. Again, we, as readers and viewers, are not meant to see Captain America as a character making decisions informed by his limited viewpoint as a white male; we are meant to see him as a stand-in for humanity, speaking for all.

White privilege, as defined by LEXICO (2020, p. 1), consists of 'inherent advantages possessed by a white person on the basis of their race in a society characterized by racial inequality and injustice'. It can be something as seemingly innocent as being able to see yourself represented in literature all the time to as deadly as being able to walk away from a simple encounter with the police. Either way, I am in agreement with Cory Collins (2018, p. 1) that, 'Having white privilege and recognizing it is not racist. But white privilege exists because of historic, enduring racism and biases'. The danger comes when white privilege is refused to be recognised. If it goes unrecognised then the institutions causing the racism and biases continue to exist with power unchecked. This is exhibited with the investigation of Julieka Dhu's death and the refusal by health care workers and police to acknowledge that their actions had an undercurrent of racism and stereotypes. Why does something like the Intervention only take place in black communities when it is acknowledged that abuse of women and children is a problem Australia-wide? To remove children with no excuse and implement extreme punitive measures if found in possession of alcohol and pornography would be unheard of in a local white community. If this can't be acknowledged, the biases within power institutions that allow this sort of racist treatment will just continue and continue. These issues and actions should be perceived through Indigenous eyes, so more people become aware of 'different subject positions' (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 21). *Avengers: The Privileged Few* aims to show Natasha and an original character (OC), Deborah, become aware of their own unchecked White Gaze and their assumption of White Ownership over Indigenous lives, for once. They begin to question what they have believed because of their culture and lenses.

3.7. Interventions and Original Characters: Deborah and Desiree's Journey

From the very beginning of *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, Deborah Stanton, one of the Alia Surat army scouts, is out to 'rescue' the 'stolen' children from the infamous terrorist cell, Nhuungku. In the beginning, her companion, Robert James (positioned as the natural hero), is killed while Deborah herself is kidnapped. She fears she will be murdered any moment. Over the course of the novel, Deborah comes through her fear of the unknown and becomes aware of her own White Gaze when viewing Indigenous people and culture. When Deborah first lays eyes on Desiree, she views her through an Orientalist gaze, perceiving Desiree as intense and her dark skin in contempt: 'The skin was dark enough to get confused with the brown cloak pooled around her shoulders. She seemed like an amorphous mass. Shivers went down Deborah's spine' (p. 49). She also thinks Desiree looks angry (the stereotype of the angry, black person) and ugly because she does not resemble what Deborah designates, in her limited viewpoint, as pretty:

The smile slipped from the woman's lips, which were larger and Deborah felt, almost grotesque. They made her look angry, even though nothing in her position spoke to aggression. (p. 50)

At first all Deborah sees is anger and danger when in reality, it is Desiree who saves Deborah's life on two separate occasions. However, all Deborah has learnt in her life is that Desiree's race is violent and without real family and so she believes it is up to her to save someone like Desiree from a loveless, lonely and angry life. Deborah refuses to see Desiree as a person because she doesn't see how Desiree could be whole without White help. In turn, she tries to claim ownership over Desiree's experiences and actions to make her 'better'. This is similar to the continued intervention into black lives to try to make Indigenous people adhere more to white living rather than give us a right to black culture.

As Deborah starts to learn more about Desiree, she resents the fact that she feels grateful to this terrorist (p. 90). Deborah shows an obliviousness to her own culture and institution's actions, ignorant to the fact that this is the way Indigenous people in Alia Surat have always felt. However, Deborah does not perceive this as wrong since she is the one doing it, whereas when people of colour do hint towards narrow-minded thinking, it is despicable. This is a nod to the fact that the Intervention

hasn't taken place in a white community as it would be unacceptable to treat a white community the same way a black one is treated. Deborah continues down this path even when Desiree reaches out to her, attempting to connect over their shared reminiscing of mothers. Deborah thinks that Desiree cannot possibly have the same feelings of love and beautiful memories that Deborah has for her own mother:

It made Deborah wonder if she ever had something as wonderful and normal as a home life like Deborah. After all, it was well-known how the Indigenous people of Alia Surat lived long before the arrival of the First Fleet, so many years ago. Even after all these years, they could still never rise up to the living standards set by the new government, especially those in the rural areas like Northern Hopes. Which was why Deborah had been out here in the first place, trying to bring about that change. Because, more than anything, she truly believed people like Desiree deserved the sort of childhood she'd experienced. (p. 91)

Deborah instinctively places White culture as superior, never stopping to think about Desiree's traditions and how they have just as much value and importance. She assumes a 'duty' that she has to implement her Whiteness onto Desiree's life and culture. She tries to dominate and assimilate Desiree, reducing her emotional attachments and knowledge (Moreton-Robinson (2000, p. 22). Deborah exhibits an assumed White Ownership of superior experience and expected dominance over Desiree's life. Meanwhile, Deborah's White Gaze (Orientalism) is also enacted here, not ever thinking from an Indigenous point of view. There is an almost innocent way to Deborah's thinking because through her own lens, she does not even realize she is being ignorant. She doesn't recognize that what she is doing isn't *liberating* but is instead, *repressing*.

Deborah is simultaneously shocked and educated as Desiree shares her own memories of her mother and Deborah begins to see her less as an object that must be acted upon but instead, as a fellow woman. She holds onto hope that she is in a way, still right, that these women are in fact terrorists. However, when she is dragged in to help with victims of an airstrike-gone-wrong on a village (stand-in for the missions in Australia), Deborah for once sees the other side of her government's actions. She helps care for the dying and wounded, coming to the realisation that she isn't helping anyone but only harming. Her real epiphany comes though when she starts talking with one of the 'stolen' children, Daniel. When she suggests he has been captured, Daniel immediately corrects her: "Captured?" he scoffed. "I think you mean saved.

You fellas were gonna take me away. Desiree got me to stay with my mum.” (p. 147). Deborah is soon enlightened that Daniel has never been abused at the hands of his mother and is, in fact, very, very loved (in line with the lies spread through the real Intervention and subsequent removals of children).

Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2000, p. 2) says, when Indigenous women write of their life, that:

The gaze of Indigenous women on themselves is inscribed into the text through their self-presentation. There is little room made available for the reader to be distracted from the inter-subjective meeting or to objectify them.

Deborah shares this experience when she actually listens to the self-representation of the Indigenous women around her, becoming aware of their gaze and how she herself is viewed through the Indigenous gaze. In that moment, she stops objectifying and begins to unpick the recent behaviour of the institutions surrounding her as well, becoming intimately aware of her White Gaze and White Privilege. Deborah makes a point to open herself up to learning from Desiree and attempts to right her wrongs. She works on decolonizing her behaviour and leaving the colonization practices in the past, forging a new present together, listening to what the Indigenous women around her are asking for. This is a nod to what *This is What They Said* (Concerned Australians, 2010) asks to be done: for the Australian government to actually have a proper relationship and partnership with the Indigenous people of this land when tackling problems rather than just Indigenous people being acted upon like objects.

The second—and arguably more important OC in my novel—is Desiree, a new Aboriginal superhero. Desiree is a leader and a carer, happily feminized attributes while turning others on their head (Goodrum, Prescott and Smith, 2018, p. 5). Her superpower of taking on people’s pain as they die is a stand-in for the inter-generational trauma passed down through generations of Indigenous people. A gifted empath, Desiree is determined to get people to care and relate to the issues her people are facing. Stolen from her mother and intimately aware of White colonization, Desiree nevertheless hopes through the passing on of knowledge and creating familiarity, she can increase Deborah’s understanding and empathy. Desiree’s power also sidesteps the Other duality implemented by imperialist superhero narratives as examined by Gavalier (2014). She doesn’t don a cape to use her power to ease her

people's suffering; it is simply part of her as a person. This is significant because she, without her power, is still Othered so it is fitting for her power to be associated with herself, not any alter ego. While she primarily uses her power for Indigenous suffering, there are two poignant moments where she tries to help two white soldiers die peacefully, one who accepts her help and another who can't let go of his racism to allow her to touch him.

Desiree feels a lot of pain from the Indigenous suffering happening around her, so much so, she sometimes blocks out the reality of it, such as her insistence that there is no war being waged. This aspect of her personality has been inspired by my experience of learning about the issues plaguing Indigenous people, feeling weighed down by the pain still permeating Indigenous lives. I continue to struggle with depression and anxiety, especially when doing research on the violence still being committed against Indigenous people and the continued removal of children. The year Julieka Dhu died at 22-years-old, I was the same age as her. It still chills me to think of her death and it has been hard to follow the case as more painful details have emerged. I cannot begin to imagine what it would be like for her family as they find out what was done to their granddaughter and daughter. I have also taken on from my family and ancestors a sense of inter-generational trauma. Because of the colonization of our people, Indigenous people have been separated from culture and land, causing much pain still rippling through the generations. Desiree's power is very much inspired by these emotions and is a tribute to the pain felt and continued to be experienced from our elders through to our young people.

Robin, Desiree's best friend, is much more realistic about their dire situation. She is a warrior in a different sense. Desiree has to come to the same conclusion at the end that a war is indeed raging, but not without the loss and passed-on trauma from Robin that she inherits. Desiree doesn't declare war though and decides to send the children away. Whether this is the right decision or Robin's was is up to the reader to decide. Maya, the other elder in the community, shows the side talked about by Verass (n.d.), where Indigenous women are afraid of retaliation when standing up to the government. Maya wants freedom but she is afraid of what the cost will be. All of these differences amongst the Indigenous characters were intended to exemplify the lack of homogeneity so often mistaken for monolithic sameness within Indigenous societies where if one Indigenous person speaks out, it is expected that we all think the same (Ahmed et al., 2000; and Moreton-Robinson, 2000). Sarah Ahmed et al.

(2000, p. 13) point out how this assumption is often mistakenly made in feminism as well and how many feminists have a different idea of what equality looks like in the future.

In the end, a huge part of Desiree's character journey is helping people see through her Indigenous eyes, the extra layers of feminist struggles that come with her Indigeneity and be aware of their own Whiteness. Desiree aims to build empathy and understanding of her rights and ownership of her own body and individuality, but the rights of her people and culture as well. I will end this section on one of the last parts we hear from Desiree, reflecting on the way she is situated in society, despite being so much more:

Like I can be summed up in two plain words, one that summarises my intelligence, my history, my culture and another that labels me as nothing more than a solitary colour. What about my eyes? My hair? My blood? Yet, all I am is black. (p. 211)

3.8. Five Things I Learned Plus One in Chapter 3

1. **Do use multiple characters to showcase heterogeneous personalities and viewpoints.** This was particularly useful for me when showing the difference within Indigenous communities and the two types of feminism at play within the novel.
2. **Do use personal experiences to inform plot and story.** My Aboriginal ways of knowing methodology greatly helped in opening up my PhD and allowing me to write about something I had first-hand knowledge on.
3. **Do use Indigi-Futurism to tackle issues.** I found the 'fictional' setting allowed me to be more creative and also gave me a safer emotional distance when writing about these trying issues.
4. **Do model characters becoming aware of their own ignorance.** This may help readers realize, even if they previously subscribed to racist ideologies, that it is never too late to shift perspectives. It should hopefully also help them not feel so much like they are being attacked, but instead, can relate to these characters' learning.
5. **Do be aware of your own biases.** Despite loving the MCU, I had to be truthful about the unremarked Whiteness problems that I saw in some of

the films, like *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). This helped me be more honest in my assessment and in my creative interventions.

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6. **Don't make Indigenous characters homogenous groups.** This plays into established stereotypes. This is about disruptions, not playing into already problematic representations.

3.9. Conclusion

This section has been about the conceptual backgrounds that I used to create my novel and the character arcs undertaken in the Creative side of my PhD. These were Aboriginal ways of knowing, the intersectionality of coloured feminism (with an emphasis on ownership of women's bodies) and unremarked Whiteness. This section has been about showing the deeper meaning behind the policies shown in *Avengers: The Privileged Few* and just how much it tackles real-life issues, despite taking place in a fictional universe and 'fictional' place.

Chapter 4: Characterisation, POV and Fan Fiction Stories

4.1. Introduction

Initially, one of the aspects which drew me to the MCU was the unique array of characters: Natasha Romanoff's terse strength with hidden kindness; Steve Rogers' view of the old and modern world; Tony Stark's unique voice, lightning wit and quiet warmth; Bruce Banner's anxious mannerisms and emotional expressions; Clint Barton's gruff persona which gains depth in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015); and, last but not least, Thor's unmistakable vernacular and growth from brash prince to fore-thinking leader. Arguably, one of components which made the characters appear so one-of-a-kind were the performances by the actors. Bruce Banner's explosive return to the screen in *The Avengers* (2012) captured audiences everywhere with a raw and engaging portrayal by Mark Ruffalo (Child, 2012; *The New Yorker*, 2012). Most notably, Robert Downey Jr.'s portrayal of Iron Man has often been credited as bringing the MCU to life (Roffman, Gerber and Gill, 2015; Suderman, 2017). But while it is wonderful when the characters' personalities become real and almost tangible (Pugh, 2005, p. 17), there are challenges fan fiction writers face when transferring those vibrant characters to a new medium. A fan fiction story suffers if readers believe the protagonists are out-of-character (OOC). For characters who obviously have strong personalities, it is hard to add to the story, or make 'more from' as Pugh (2005, p. 19) says, while staying within the boundaries of what makes the canon so loved in the first place. In this chapter, I explore my responses to these challenges, with a particular focus on free indirect discourse as one solution.

Even though I was taking the characters out of their usual milieu in the films, I still wanted to tell the story through their eyes. While a film allows us as viewers to watch characters and listen to what they are saying, a novel delves into interiority, the way the characters think and the way they view the situation they are in. Films such as *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) play with the way two characters will not perceive the same situation in the same way but this difference in perception is largely dramatized through action and dialogue. In my novel, I wanted the difference in viewpoints to be more pronounced, supported by differences in voice, points of view and thought processes. A struggle I faced was deciding how best to make sure the

characters did not all sound the same since a novel does not have the actors' support in portraying the characters differently. They have to sound unique purely on paper. How could I expand on the MCU characters in a way that didn't sound disingenuous?

However, firstly, before I go into detail of the writing techniques I used to transition from movie to novel, I will examine another genre that does this: tie-in novels and how fan fiction-modelled storytelling differentiates from this type of transmedia.

4.2. Tie-in Novels and Fan Fiction-Modelled Storytelling

Viewed through one lens, fan fiction novels can be seen as effectively a form of tie-in novels, just not written with the canonical authority of the latter. However, I argue there are key differences between the two genres.

Continuity is perhaps one of the most valued aspects of tie-in novels, so there is no 'noncontradictory additions to the franchise' (Clarke 2009, p. 439). MJ Clarke (2009, p. 441) explores the tie-in novel's unique place in the franchise and the restrictions often placed on the writers, outlining the importance that their tie-in novels fit within canon (from characters and settings to themes and tone) with no contradictory information. Clarke (2009, p. 441) points out that while these tie-in novels are often not considered to be *official* canon, it does not diminish how essential it is for the novels to still fit perfectly within franchise's story. One tie-in writer of *Alias* that Clarke (2009, p. 442) interviews says that "“We are playing with somebody's else's ball in their backyard. That means they get to make the rules, we get to stay in the yard.”" This is interesting because a well-known fan fiction disclaimer is that while the fan writers don't own the franchise, they are just playing in someone else's sandbox. However, a strong difference is that while fan writers acknowledge they are playing with someone else's toys, this does not mean the stories or storytelling style will conform to the original franchise. Instead, fan fiction is an imaginative play where writers and fans can create whatever they desire. The stories are often written just for the pleasure of the writers themselves or a specific group of fans that share the same fan passions or ships (where a fan 'ships' one character with another. Most pairings are not canon compliant and are not expected to be).

Also, interestingly, while tie-in writers do identify as fans of the media tie-ins they write, often drawing on fan-sites to gather information on continuity, they try to distance themselves from what they deem ‘hardcore fans’:

‘In conversation, one APO writer stated ‘‘now there is a difference between being a fan and being a fan. I’ve never really been a hardcore fan of any show. Never dressed in costume for a convention. Never got into a heated argument about whether Buffy loved Angel or Spike more.’’ (Clarke 2009, p. 444).’

Clarke (2009, p. 444) believes that the last statement around opinions and debates in fandom is what really differentiates tie-in writers to fan fiction writers:

Yet I would argue that the writer’s final statement—having to do with debates over meaning within the show—gets at the heart of the matter and the cause of distancing fandom... In other words, tie-in writers can use many of the tools of fandom... but must shy away from speculation.

For tie-in novels to be considered successful, the characters must ‘sound’ like themselves on the page and there be no changes to the main characters or storyline that would make an impact on the original canonical content (Clarke, pp 2009. 447-448). Even when introducing new characters in tie-in novels, Clarke (2009, p. 453) refers to these as ‘echo characters’ and describes them as stand-ins for the pre-existing ones to counteract ‘the possibly disruptive effects’ of introducing new ones. This also goes the same for themes. Clarke (2009, pp. 453-454) illustrates this in *Alias* tie-in novels where they borrow the canon’s sets of themes, with slight differences here and there. This is known as ‘echo themes’, same as the characters in tie-in novels.

Matt Hills (2012), in his article on *Torchwood* media that was created around the original show (which Hills refer to as transmedia), also acknowledges how fans are often brought in to create the transmedia but have many industrial limitations placed on them, unlike fan fiction storytelling. Hills (2012, p. 411) acknowledges this transmedia storytelling rewards fans for close readings with more hyperdiegetic⁵ world-building. However, Hills (2012, p. 412) challenges the notion that this new licensing of transmedia storytelling meets all of fans’ needs and wants, but, instead, better serves corporate interest and can be a type of ‘fanagement’, shutting down not only possible future fan criticisms, but also, fans’ creative play with texts. Instead,

⁵ Hyperdiegetic is defined as ‘the potential for playful. intervention and ideation with a narrative’ (Matt Hills referenced by Jones, Cronin and Piacentini, 2018., p. 4).

Hills (2012, p. 412) recognises that fandom is not homogenous, but is, instead, diverse groups with many different readings from the same text:

For one thing, what if fan cultures are divided by radically different stances toward the unfolding text? While one group of fans may wish to return to an earlier phase in the franchise's development, another group may wish to keep up with current narratives and transmedia extensions. The avoidance of redundancy – where this merely reiterates character relationships – can be at odds with a section of fandom actively desiring such “redundancy” in the form of stories about characters who have left the current show, or who have been killed off.

This is an extremely important point. One of my best friends and I have a running joke that retcon *Avengers: Endgame*'s (2019) very existence because we were so displeased with the narrative and characterisations. Jenkins, in *Textual Poachers* (1992), also acknowledges when fans reject canon, believing later parts of the franchise no longer fits with the show they first fell in love with, choosing to only accept the events up until a certain point.

So, I would argue the main difference between media tie-in novels and fan fiction is the freedom for speculation. Hills (2012, p. 413) sums up the difference perfectly here:

Like scholars, then, tie-in writers are hemmed in or interpretively constrained, albeit by industrial parameters rather than by academia's institutional norms of textual accuracy. The type of transmedia storytelling represented by media tie-ins, even where this appears to empirically unite fandom and industry in the form of fans being paid to create official texts, thereby necessarily fails to unite dominant forms of fan practice (speculation and textual transformation) with industrial practice.

Fan fiction embraces speculation and interacts differently with the original text than tie-in novels do, promoting a playful creativity, without locking a writer down to the canonical themes and characters.

4.3. Defining Free Indirect Discourse

Shifting focus back, I will now examine free indirect discourse and how I used it in *The Avengers: The Privileged Few*.

Free indirect discourse proved to be a great way to balance the dialogue-heavy rhythm of the MCU films while providing space for interiority. Abbot (2008) defines free indirect discourse as:

... a kind of ventriloquism of different voices, all done completely without the usual signposts of punctuation and attribution, while maintaining the grammatical third person... [T]he author simply allows a character's voice or thoughts momentarily to take over the narrative voice. (Abbot, 2008, p. 77)

What distinguishes free indirect discourse from other narrative techniques is the unique voice of a narrator, who is usually a character, with no signposts, strewn *freely* throughout the text, and always in third person. Free indirect discourse has a long history of effective use within literary fiction like Gustave Flaubert's *Madam Bovary* (Abbot, 2008, p. 77). Without any signposts of a point of view shift, Abbot (2008, p. 77) shows how the text flows seamlessly in and out of Emma's POV.

Zhang (n.d., p. 1), quoting Ann Banfield, says free indirect discourse is 'represented speech and thought' and 'represented perception'. The reader sees the world through the character without any indicators, which melds all throughout the novel and makes the reader closer to the character and their perspective. Eckardt (2014, p. 2) gives an overview of the different understandings and perspectives free indirect discourse can provide from a character's point of view: epistemic, emotional, evaluative and temporal. One of the values that Zhang discusses is the increased emphasis on focalization and narrative point of view:

As the omniscient narrator disappears and presenting the narrative from the perspective of a character becomes more prominent, free indirect discourse becomes an elegant way to represent a character's thoughts, speech, and perceptions directly without the intervention of a narrator who reports these. It also does double-duty. Once the facts of the narrative are presented through the perspective of a particular character, we're learning something about not only the world that is being perceived, but also the subject who is perceiving it. (Zhang, n.d., p. 1)

Of importance here is what Zhang refers to as the technique's 'double-duty'. Free indirect discourse simultaneously exposes the character to the reader without a middle-man, so to speak, as well as getting the reader to learn more about the world and plot. I believe it is also a more natural way for the reader to become familiar and

more intimate with the character. Rather than having an omniscient narrator relate events or describe a character's thoughts to the reader, the character is exposed through the text and the reader can establish for themselves how they feel about that character as well as get to know the plot and setting of the novel. It is an effective tool, one which can create a good plot propulsion and affection (or distaste) for a character.

But free indirect discourse is not without its challenges, particularly with a large ensemble cast. To incorporate free indirect discourse effectively, one has to know the character extremely well. This is easier if there are fewer characters. With six main characters whose point of view I wanted to look through, it became a challenge to make each sound individual. Feedback on my early drafts indicated the individual voices were not clear enough. Instead, the chapters, even though they were from different characters' perspectives, all tended to sound extremely similar. Perhaps the dialogue at times retained a unique voice but a character's narrative was not their own. Take this excerpt for a brief example: 'The redhead's lips curved into a genuine smile. "I didn't know you had such an appreciation for art critic techniques"' (p. 11 of an old draft). This is meant to be from Natasha's view but straight away, the reader is jolted out of it with the reference to 'the redhead'. This is often referred to as head-hopping. The description reads from an outsider's perspective, not from Natasha's at all. This pulls the reader out of the point of view and does not create any intimacy with the character. It makes the reader an observer along with the unnamed narrator, rather than making them feel they are viewing Natasha's thoughts and identifying with her.

Lack of individuality can also be a problem. Here are two examples below from an old draft, which are meant to be from two different characters' points of view:

One moment, she [Natasha] thought she was getting a read on him, but each time she thought she had an understanding so a better knowledge of how to control any situation involving him, it all withered away before she could sink her fingers into it. (p. 13)

And:

Though he [Clint] couldn't see it, he knew her eyes would be rolling but other than that, Laura didn't argue. Instead, she linked a hand with the one he had on her stomach, stroking the back of it. The veins stood out on his hand like they did all along his arm, especially when he flexed. (p. 39)

Glaring mistakes aside such as too-long sentences and over occupation with visual description, there is not much differentiating the two narratives other than the different people in each scene. Without the name headings, each example could be from either Clint or Natasha's point of view. There is no real difference in the expressions. Free indirect discourse is not being utilised here.

4.4. Practical methods to develop free indirect discourse: The Drabble and Five Plus One

I began using practical methods adapted from the fan community to practice and fine-tune the writing style needed for the novel. These included drabbles and five (plus one) moments. A drabble is an exact one-hundred word short piece of fiction, often used in the fan community, to either bridge a moment in a film or provide a brief insight into a character's thoughts at a key moment. For instance, I could write a drabble on what went through Steve Rogers' mind in *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) when he said to fight on the aeroplane strip. I used the drabble to help limit my often extraneous writing pieces and get into a character's mind. It helped me to create a unique voice for each different character in a succinct tone. I have already used the five (plus one) structure in my exegesis, but to provide more context, five (plus one) moments are often stories based around a common theme. For instance, I could create a five (plus one) story called *Five times Hulk lost his temper and the one time Bruce Banner did*. Many of the stories produced using this technique are short in length and followed the form of the one hundred word drabble. I used the drabble-length five (plus one) format in my writing practices to help limit my word count. I also used this format—setting a theme for myself—to work on how a character would speak under a variety of circumstances to understand more individual voices of the characters.

I experimented with writing drabbles through one character's point of view and to write each character describing another so I could force myself to focus on what that character would or would not notice. For example, one of my stories, *Five Times an Avenger described each other*, helped me get a distinct voice for the

characters and understand what stood out to them when they encountered someone new. Clint's observations were quick and sharp, getting as much information as possible in the smallest amount of time. In contrast, Bruce's concentration was mostly on movements, and he was not bothered by tenor of voice or other identifying characteristics Clint might take to catalogue someone in his mind's eye.

Here is one of my drabbles from the exercises, part of the 5 plus 1 collection called *5 Things Steve didn't know the name of and 1 Thing he did*.

'Why's the thinga-me-bob not working?' Steve repeatedly pressed a button on the flat object.

Tony leaned over the couch and rolled his eyes. 'It needs to be charged, genius.'

Steve frowned. 'Charged?'

He remembered now Tony talking about plugging it in to power sometimes. It was more fun though to see Tony's cool façade slip.

'I can't do this *again*.' Tony turned on his heel, but called back, 'And it's called a damn iPad, not whatever the hell you said.'

'Thinga-me-bob,' Steve felt obliged to specify.

The reply he got was not suitable to be said in front of ladies.

This collection of drabbles were all from Steve's POV as I was finding his voice difficult to capture and this helped me articulate how dissonant the world could feel to him. It also gave me numerous glimpses inside of his mind and the different way he would approach a problem as compared to other characters like Natasha or Clint.

4.5. Free Indirect Discourse at work in *Avengers: The Privileged Few*

As mentioned earlier, free indirect discourse helps the reader feel closer to different characters, understanding their side and identifying with them, perhaps even mimicking their journey and revelations. Free indirect discourse can also help readers see through a different set of eyes and create an intimacy and knowledge with the characters they get to see the world through. For example, in Natasha's POV, to help make her voice more individual and create more authentic characterisation, she sees in synaesthesia. To describe an example in detail, when building up Natasha's POV, I focused on two main aspects of characterisation: her tendency to represent emotion through colour and her struggle to find a home.

The very first page from her viewpoint while she is hiding in Gimmelwald introduces my use of colours:

Yellow didn't worry her much. Through her eyes, yellow formed an aura around a person whose authenticity she doubted... Black was worse. That meant danger that you couldn't see... [A]s for red... (p. 4)

Straight away, her voice is identifiable and readers can understand the traumatic memories and feelings that colours mean to her. While arguably most readers may not see in colours, more people will likely be able to sympathize or empathize with something triggering a bad memory in Natasha. At the beginning, she can't stand to be outside as the red of the sunrise begins to touch the land. Seeing this, readers will be able to more identify with her struggle later when she lands in Alia Surat and the red dirt puts her on edge: 'So much red... she felt she was under constant attack... it was bringing back things she'd long wanted to be buried' (p. 102). This fear of hers brings readers closer to Natasha and they can see that it is bringing up painful memories for her. It also makes her vulnerable, breaking down some of her barriers, which can help readers get closer to her again.

Secondly, it was important to me that Natasha be searching for a home, something that might not be obvious from the movies where she is depicted as cool, calm and collected. This is exhibited in her first chapter when Clint refers to Natasha returning as coming home: 'Natasha felt cold at Clint's easy mention of home' (p. 8). Natasha has never really had a home, but tries to not let that bother her. She tries to concentrate on the fact that Clint wants her back and maybe she does belong in New York with him as her best friend. However, when she returns to the Tower and the rest of the team are there, she feels further thrown off guard when she sees how well Clint knows the rest of the team and like she is on the outside once again:

Natasha watched it all play out in front of her. It felt at times as if she was viewing a movie and wished, just for a few seconds, she could pause it. (p. 46)

She then throws herself further into the prospect of a mission when the offer comes along from Sussler, more desperate than ever to feel like she belongs *somewhere*. If readers weren't directly in Natasha's mind and seeing her despairing more and more at trying to find her place in life, they could see Natasha's decision to take on the Alia

Surat mission as pig-headed and ignorant. While there is an element of ignorance to her actions, readers can hopefully sympathize with her character, wanting so desperately to belong that she isn't making the wisest, or most-informed decisions.

Free indirect discourse also helped illuminate the other characters' POVs. For example, when Natasha interacts with Bruce at the beginning of the novel, he is portrayed as quietly menacing, expressed through her synaesthesia: 'Bruce's eyes flickered to her. Shadowy streaks wavered off his aura, like hands trying to physically warn her away' (p. 18). She constantly reads him as someone who is trying to throw her off-balance on purpose and someone she needs to learn to control. This Othering is done on purpose, showing how easy it is for people to misconstrue someone's actions, especially when we perceive them as a threat. However, when the novel finally explores Bruce's POV (which doesn't happen until page 93), the reader sees through his intimate POV that Bruce isn't trying to intimidate Natasha at all. When they land in Alia Surat, Bruce feels Natasha watching him all the time and is tired of the way she constantly scrutinizes him:

He knew it was petty but when she was constantly trying to pull every tiny string apart that held him together, he automatically pushed back however he could. Petty. Yes. Uncalled for? Nah. He didn't think so. (p. 93)

Not only in the free indirect discourse am I able to show Bruce's sarcasm, I am also able to show that Bruce isn't trying to intimidate Natasha. Instead, he is trying to protect himself from her probing and sometimes manipulative words (something readers know she is doing since she specifies as such in her own POV). Not only do readers know that Bruce has worked out Natasha is trying to find something to work or control him, they see that he wants to be left alone.

For the other original Avengers' POVs, I worked, through free indirect discourse, to make them as individual as possible. Tony's viewpoint is often full of overlong sentences with non-sequiturs and random percentages, showing his manic mind and underlying anxiety. Clint's voice is very laconic and to the point, exhibiting his easy-going nature but also his effectiveness as a spy. Thor was a bit easier to make distinctive as he has a very specific vernacular which I made sure to utilize when writing the one small section from his POV. Steve's was a little harder and I worked on making his voice very genuine with not much subtext to his words. Through

watching the films, I felt Steve often said exactly how he felt, for better or for worse. However, the two main POVs from the Avengers are Natasha then Bruce. Readers get to experience their growing familiarity with each other through their intimate viewpoints and how their opinions change about each other over time, particularly on Natasha's side. As Natasha becomes as familiar with Bruce as the reader is, she realizes there is nothing to fear, which I will go into more in the positive group dynamics section.

Free indirect discourse brings the reader into closer familiarity with Desiree and Deborah as well. At the very start, we do not experience any of Desiree's thoughts, but instead, only Deborah's viewpoint of her. We are treated to the White Gaze, where all Deborah sees Desiree as is ugly, deadly and uncultured. However, the narrative shifts gradually over into Desiree's POV, showing the reality of the situation and how the 'heroes'' actions are truly perceived by an Indigenous eye (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). This personal POV also helps the reader become closer to Desiree, feeling her pain as she watches her family die around her, the pressure to care for the children she helped save and the struggle not to become as violent as those who are attacking her. Readers would not be so intimately familiar with Desiree's struggles if it wasn't for free indirect discourse, making them see what she is feeling, but more importantly, feel what she is feeling. This is especially poignant when she uses her superpower of taking on someone's pain so they can die in peace. It is an especially strong moment when Desiree has to help her best friend, Robin, die after she is shot:

Rather than feeling the fear, anger, worry or mental anguish as she always did when helping the dying to a peaceful death, Desiree felt the most powerful wave of grief she'd ever experienced. She closed her eyes to try to get away from the drowning sadness. But it made her sick and even more tears came as her chest *ached*. (p. 162)

The free indirect discourse gives readers the chance to see what happens when heroes implement their will on people and how that is viewed by the people it is implemented on (like the policies enforced on Black Australia). Readers get to see that when Deborah thought the children were stolen, they were, in fact, saved. When she viewed Desiree as a savage, the readers know that Desiree is not violent and in reality, it is the people Deborah work for who are actually violent and repressive. Readers get to see the aftermath of a bombing and Robin being shot, of the mourning,

seeing and feeling the pain inflicted. Poignantly, free indirect discourse is never used for the characters of Sussler and his ex-wife and journalist, Danielle. Readers are meant to keep them at a distance, learning to empathize and seek out the characters who are acted upon more, reducing the ‘Othering’ of Indigenous people and instead, understanding, sympathising and humanising.

4.6. Five Things I Learned Plus One in Chapter 4

1. **Do use free indirect discourse to promote an affective response.** The closer readers can engage with characters, the more likely the intimacy.
2. **Do use your own reading of text to expand on visual characters.** At one point, you have to trust yourself that you have something to add to these characters (which isn’t explicitly stated in canon) while still keeping them ‘in character’ (if that is what you want).
3. **Do examine other texts’ techniques in differentiating character voices.** This is especially useful when you find a novel that is in a similar genre in the one you wish to write.
4. **Do use drabble exercises to help differentiate character voices.** This was one of the most useful exercises for me and made me individualise my character voices a lot quicker.
5. **Do use different POVs to illuminate perspectives that may have not been noticeable or accessible to readers previously.** I found this a powerful dynamic to employ, showing an Aboriginal viewpoint in a world where it is either invisible or ignored. It also felt empowering for the potential to share that usually silenced story with other readers.
+
6. **Don’t worry about including POV sections for every character in your story.** This can fill your story with unnecessary scenes just for the sake of balance and take attention away from the core of the story you are telling.

4.7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have looked at the writing techniques I employed to invite an affective learning experience for my readers as well as comfort: strong

characterisation through free indirect discourse in *Avengers: The Privileged Few*. Again, while this study hasn't addressed reader reception (i.e., how effective my techniques have been), it has demonstrated the secondary research I undertook as to why I chose the above techniques and my own personal auto-ethnographic approach that formed the basis of my approaches. The next chapter will cover the other writing techniques I used to try to encourage my readers to engage in my interventions and affective learning: domesticity and positive group dynamics.

Chapter 5: Domesticity and Positive Group Dynamics

5.1. Introduction

While the critical reviews of *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015) were divided, one thing seems to be unanimous: everyone loved the party scene. After a bombastic action opening, viewers got to see the Avengers just being friends (Breihan, 2019; Marvel Cinema Universe Wiki, 2019). The party scene is fun from start to finish: Tony Stark and Thor try to one-up each other on who has the more successful girlfriend, Natasha Romanoff flirts with Bruce Banner and Steve Rogers plays pool with Sam Wilson while discussing his search for Bucky Barnes. As Breihan (2019) points out, despite being grounded in action, the MCU seems to have excited fan engagement particularly through quieter moments of characterisation and team bonding. Viewers (myself included) loved seeing the Avengers at-ease and what they are like ‘behind-the-scenes’, so to speak. One user on Marvel Cinema Universe Wiki (2019, p. 1) describes what so many people arguably felt:

I am an Age of Ultron defender, and my favourite thing about the film is getting to see them just BE the Avengers... being a team of friends. A team who have worked out tricks and skills for cooperating and clearly have built a rapport together... the whole party is a great scene for “What are the Avengers like together when they're off-duty?” It's that stuff that is what engages us with characters, what they are like as people, and I love this scene for that.

This comment reflects a broader observation by Goodrum, Prescott and Smith (2018, p. 6) that many ‘superhero stories’ have shifted to become ‘stories that have superheroes in them’. This shift means that action scenes are counterpointed with domestic scenes, helping to build powerful characterisation and relationships.

This new focus on domesticity aligns itself neatly with an enduring characteristic of fan fiction, one which first drew me to the genre. “Domestic fic” is a prevalent subgenre within fan fiction, as explained on Fanlore.org (n.d., p. 1):

Domestic fic or **Domestic AUs** [Alternate Universes] are works showing canon characters living their everyday lives. This form of AU is particularly popular in fandoms with supernatural or science fiction elements, but unlike Mundane AUs, it's not necessary to remove these elements to have a domestic fic. Instead the characters are placed in

domestic scenarios, which are removed from the stresses of canon.
(original emphasis)

For instance, rather than taking the magic out of *Game of Thrones* in an AU, a domestic fic might include a story where Tyrion and Jamie go hunting and bond as brothers. There is even a subgenre of domestic fic called Curtainfic that concentrates on very domestic situations, like, romantic ships buying curtains and is considered to be mostly full of fluff (Fanlore, n.d.).

Within the fan fiction on the MCU, we can see evidence of the interest in domesticity through two dominating tags on Archive of Our Own—“Domestic Avengers” and “Team as Family”. As of February 2021, approximately 4,566 stories have the former tag and 7,030 stories contain the latter tag. The Domestic Avengers focuses on stories in which the Avengers live together in Stark Tower or the Avengers Mansion and they mostly focus on humour. The “Team as Family” is a common tag (in February 2021, there were 25,878 stories for all fandoms with that tag) across multiple works, franchises and universes which creates ‘found family feels’ as characters in an ensemble cast work together. It involves ‘two or more people choosing to treat one another as family in an emotional sense (and sometimes legally as well)’ and can either be friendship-based or sexual in nature (Fanlore, n.d., p. 1). This emphasis on kindness, warmth and comfort is why domestic fics and domesticity is often associated with fluff (Fanlore, n.d., p. 1), which in turn usually emphasises happy endings, the sweet elements of the story or the kindness shown between characters. It is not that the domestic cannot tackle difficult issues; it is more that the tone of the stories tends towards warmth, nurturing and care.

5.2. Defining Domesticity

Despite the prevalence of domesticity and positive group dynamics within fan fiction, very little scholarship has addressed the topic directly. A number of scholars such as Bacon-Smith (1991), Jenkins (1992), Penley (1997) and Baym (1999) have investigated the importance of romance and sexuality but, in contrast, friendship has not been explored in great detail. As a result, I have drawn predominantly upon the work of Anna Wilson and Kim Wilkins to go further into these craft techniques. Wilson (2015) sees domesticity as playing a central role in creating her hermeneutics of intimacy. “Team as Family” emphasises that domesticity is familial and ultimately

allows the reader to relate to characters even if they live within a fantastical world. Wilkins (2012, p. 7) agrees with this notion: the emphasis on characters' feelings and emotions within and outside of domestic spaces creates emotional realism the readers can connect with. Wilson (2015, p. 7) also points out how domesticity centres readers and makes them relate to the characters all the more because these are emotions, scenarios and spaces in which they can see themselves. These perspectives suggest, and this chapter argues, that the relatability of domestic settings and the kinds of interactions they foreground promote a closer relationship between the viewer and the character, supporting affective attachment and learning.

Domesticity—from the Latin *domus*, or 'home'—has often been primarily considered in terms of spaces such as the kitchen, lounge area or bedroom. Originally, the term 'domestic spaces' was used from an anthropological and archaeological angle, looking at what domestic spaces signified in historical and pre-historic homes (Cieraad, 1999). Much scholarship has addressed the gendering of domestic spaces, marking them primarily as women's spaces in contrast to the public spaces of men. Cohenour (2008, p. ii), for example, in examining Gothic literature, says that 'idealized male and female behaviour in particular places creates "gendered spaces"'. Cohenour (2008, p. iii) points out that the construction of these domestic spaces through gendered lines can uphold gendered tropes while the deconstruction of the gendered lines can subvert said tropes. This is important for my project. Stories can blur the lines between the political, career-driven, public sphere (coded male) and the domestic, household space (coded as female); these stories can also foreground the pressures women face when stepping outside of their designated space.

My project, as I have discussed in previous chapters, acknowledges the historical significance of this domestic space, especially in relation to the oppression of the female body and mind. The domestic space also has an extra layer of oppression to women of colour where Aboriginal women were enslaved, raped and abused by the males and females of the domestic household (Moreton-Robinson, 2000). But as Erdoğan (2017, p. 1) points out, the domestic has many valences: when examining the significance of a specific home in Edirne, Turkey, there can be an unacknowledged depth of culturally traditional, social, religious, familial and relational practices within the domestic space that can be powerful, not oppressive. Thus, my project involves not just bringing females into traditionally male spaces but rather highlighting how both fan fiction and *Avengers: The Privileged Few* create

audience engagement by placing traditionally public characters within private, domestic spaces.

Domestic spaces are often associated with gendered, domestic values such as caring, intimacy, kindness, warmth, affect and vulnerability. I have argued already that there is a long tradition of these values being ignored or coded as less intelligent within both academic and creative writing traditions (Sedgwick, 2003; Wilson, 2015, 2016a and 2016b; Michael, Prescott and Smith, 2018). But in *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, by attempting to subvert gendered tropes, I have explored the value of attributes traditionally coded feminine for both male and female characters. A chief reason for this has been my desire to highlight the comfort that can come from the warmth of interactions grounded in domestic values. Wilkins, herself a romance writer as well as a fantasy writer, demonstrates the core value of scenes organised around the kinds of values I have been discussing. In doing so, she discusses the broad rhythms of most 'genre' novels (2012, p. 12):

To understand the rhythm of story, we can loosely adapt the Freudian ideas of the pleasure principle and the death drive. That is, story can be seen as an interplay between the desire to stay forever in pleasure and the desire to return to an inert state. Or, if you prefer the classics, narrative structure grows from an interplay between eros (desire) and thanatos (death). We all know the intense gratification of being in the midst of a huge novel, wanting to stay lost in the story forever and yet at the same time finding ourselves unable to stop turning the pages and racing towards the resolution.

Within this framework, eros scenes might commonly be associated with love, cooperation, sex and other prosocial actions. Fan fiction happily embraces the pleasure (Eros/desire) principle in much of its fiction. There are even tags on Archive of Our Own called PWP (which can stand for Porn without Plot/Plot? What Plot?). Embracing multiple types of relationships, fan fiction has no issue with depicting pleasure through sexually-charged scenes. In the case of *Star Trek*, fan fiction famously brought gay relationships to the forefront (and not so famously before, *The Man from Uncle* fan fiction [Fanlore, n.d.]) with the then infamous Kirk/Spock relationship stories, which simply became known as slash (Bacon-Smith, 1991; Jenkins, 1992). Cranz (2016, p. 1) documents a little how prolific slash was in the past compared to femslash (female/female relationships) and how femslash used to be at the furthest, most rare recesses of the internet, making the note, 'unlike m/m slash

fiction, which is written by (primarily straight) women for (primarily straight) women, femslash is written by queer women and *for* queer women'. Cranz (2016, p. 1) gives some credit to *The 100* television show and its fan fiction for making femslash more accessible and well-known. Interestingly, fan fiction seems to bring relationships and voices often unheard to the forefront until it seeps into mainstream media, as it has with its slash and femslash fiction.

However, far less attention has been paid to non-sexual aspects of the pleasure principle, such as friendship and intimacy. In *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, I emphasise domestic scenes of friendship, showing the growing intimacy between teammates which borders on familial. Because slash and femslash took front and centre when fan fiction began to attract scholarly analysis, less attention has been paid to the importance friendship can play in the genre. In my novel, Bruce and Natasha have an undercurrent of romance in their private scenes together (in their quarters in Alia Surat, in the desert together, etc.) but, more importantly, those moments are built on an intimacy of comfort that comes from their growing friendship.

5.3. Domesticity in Action

Thus far, I have focused on highlighting the importance of domesticity within fan fiction and, increasingly, within the MCU. When I came to write my novel, however, I was aware that science fiction and fantasy as genres have traditionally depended upon action and adventure and that domestic scenes might seem dull, repetitive or not central to the plot. I wanted then to explore a model within popular fiction that drew on this characteristic of fan fiction but had succeeded within mainstream publishing. The novel I turned to was *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* by Becky Chambers, an author whose background was originally within fan fiction (Chambers, 2021). The novel was self-published in 2014 and was the first self-published book to be shortlisted for the Kitschies Golden Tentacle Award for best Debut Novel. It was subsequently republished by Hodder and Stoughton where it was shortlisted for the 2016 Arthur C. Clarke Award as well as for the British Fantasy Award for Best Newcomer; it has since, at this time of writing, achieved a Goodreads score of 4.15 from just over 80,000 reviews (Goodreads, 2021).

In the universe of Galactic Commons, Chambers' (2014) novel explores the lives and adventures of a multi-species crew on the spaceship, *The Wayfarer*. As the

crew travel on their way to a particularly dangerous job of creating wormholes between planets, readers get to understand the characters' inner struggles but, most importantly, their shifting relationships with each other. There are clear traces of Chambers' fan fiction background in her highlighting of domesticity. For example, key characters are introduced to the reader with a warmth and familiarity that comes across as Team as Family (Chambers, 2014, p. 11). In one poignant scene, the ship's captain, Ashby, is ignoring his two arguing mechanics, Jenks and Kizzy (Chambers, 2014, pp. 45-47). There is a real warmth to the scene with Ashby almost like an indulgent, long-suffering father figure while Jenks and Kizzy bring the playful competitiveness that resembles a sibling relationship (something they admit to later on in the book). Another important character within the novel is Rosemary, a newcomer to the spaceship who sees the closeness of the crew but is initially unable to participate in it (Chambers, 2014, pp. 45-47). Chambers paces the novel such that readers are given time to stew in this disconnect before allowing Rosemary to form those same bonds herself (Chambers, 2014, pp. 195-196). Arguably, the first real *action* scene does not happen until page 157 (remarkable in such an action-filled genre!) where the ship is attacked. For me, I feel the real beauty of Chambers' (2014) book is that by the time I got to the traditional 'action', I truly cared about all the characters. It *meant* something to see them in danger as I was attached enough to them by this point to be upset if one of them were hurt, or worse, killed.

Other reviewers, however, criticized the book for its handling of the balance between domesticity and plot. Lovegrove (2015, p. 1), when reviewing Chambers' novel, said it was catered to the Tumblr generation and a 'feel-good tale of non-conformity, gender fluidity, multiculturalism and unorthodox sexual relationships'. However, Lovegrove's (2015, p. 1) main complaint is there 'isn't much plot' and instead, it follows characters quipping, bantering and becoming family: 'It's all perfectly pleasant, if somewhat lacking in dramatic tension'. Martini (2016, p.1) has a similar complaint, saying, 'Then you start to realize that as much as you love these characters and the exquisitely developed universe they inhabit, nothing much happens'. Martini concludes that the last 40 pages are where the action really gets going and that the novel could have:

[B]enefitted from an editor who could have helped the writer prune... the offshoots that, while interesting (and likely to make great stories on their own), suck a lot of the narrative force from this tale. (Martini, 2016, p. 1)

I find it interesting that these offshoots, while admitted to be very enjoyable and interesting, are still not considered beneficial because they do not add to the conventional plot that we, as readers, are used to in a traditional science fiction novel. The suggestion that nothing really happens until the explosion at the end of the novel hints at my argument that Chambers' novel is much more weighted towards domestic scenes, values and spaces rather than traditional 'action' where there is turmoil, death and violence (which are coded as more masculine forms of expression rather than the feminine coded domestic feelings and/or actions of comfort and warmth). This type of story, a team becoming family, is a perfectly acceptable plot within fan fiction. Why is this considered 'nothing' in a novel format?

This brings me back to fan fiction and how its purpose is often to make the readers *feel* something. Chambers' novel made me feel the highs and lows of these characters' emotions. In fact, for many fans—if not for traditional reviewers—it was exactly this aspect that made the novel so successful and engaging. Morehouse (2018, p. 1), when writing a casual review of Chambers' novel, points out the fan fiction qualities but how that made the novel powerful and enjoyable rather than being detrimental to the narrative:

I think I loved it for the same reasons that a really good fan fic can be deeply satisfying. The characters and their interactions were marvellous and charming af. I wanted to live with these people and follow them around as they did their day-to-day stuff. Given the lack of conflict, this book should have been boring, but I whizzed through this 513-page book in one weekend.

Morehouse (2018, p. 1) also argues for the likeliness that more novels will be coming out with this sort of emphasis on characterisation, relatability and feelings rather than the typical plot:

The twenty-somethings of today have been weaned on reading fan fic and their requirements for plot are very different than those of my parent's [sic] generation. And if it leads to more books like this? The future is very bright.

Again, the requirements from readers of fan fiction are very different from traditional novel formats. The strength and intimacy of the feelings created by domestic-based interactions are something to be valued and enjoyed. Chambers' (2014) novel showed me that it is possible to still bring that warmth and familiarity through domesticity in a traditional novel format rather than keeping it relegated to Archive of Our Own. In *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, I emphasise these domestic layers more than I normally would have if I was writing what I thought would be expected for a typical action superhero novel, but I allowed the domestic aspect of fan fiction to shine through.

Along with this threaded middle-ground on domesticity, I was also wary of how much fan fiction speculation to use, not wanting to outright contradict the canon, but also, wanting to keep the fan fiction-modelled creativity of expanding on themes and characterisation. So, I wanted to utilise fan fiction storytelling speculation, while at the same time, providing room for the PhD to fit within the MCU timeline, trying not to outright violate canon.

To do this, I picked a temporal moment in the MCU that fitted in between coming events of the franchise, placing *The Avengers: The Privileged Few* between *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* (2014) and *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015). Clarke (2009) points out how this is a feature of tie-in novels where it is carefully placed within a franchise's timeline so as not to contradict the original canonical content.

When it came to the original characters, I certainly felt the pressure to make them 'sound' in character. However, with using fan fiction modes of storytelling, I was able to use imaginative play and speculation, portraying Bruce and Tony as best friends; developing a warm relationship between Natasha and Tony; and exploring how I envisioned Natasha would feel losing her position at S.H.I.E.L.D. and coming to realise her own value without it being tied to patriarchal evaluation systems. While keeping the core characters, I expanded on how I believed they would handle these new situations and relationships that I placed them within. For example, being confronted with systematic racism, something which could be quite disruptive to future narratives of the MCU, like *Captain America: Civil War* (2016). This is especially because I used the original characters rather than creating echo characters to speculate with. I also moved away from the echo themes of the MCU, which, especially before *Black Panther* (2018), never acknowledged the systems of power at

play within race (and coloured feminism, something still not deeply explored within the MCU). This was the same with my original characters, Desiree, Deborah and Robin. I did not want them to be echo characters, but people that interacted with the characters I had already attached to, pushing them to be more than what they had been before.

This balancing act fed into my portrayal of Bruce and Natasha's growing relationship. Within my fan fiction, I often write them as officially becoming a couple after a slow burn relationship that usually takes place after *The Avengers* (2012). However, I did not want to outright contradict canon, playing with the middle-ground once again. I wanted for readers to be able to read this place in time and still see it as a possibility of being *real* in the sense of how certain fans accept canon.

I believe this also has to do with my position as a fan. I accepted the MCU canon up until *Captain America: Civil War* (2016) where I started to reject the characterisation and plots. I did not feel it suited the original characters and plotlines that I had fallen in love with, pulling away from the Team as Family trope that I had speculated from earlier movies. So, I wanted this novel to fit within that timeline where, for me, it was still the MCU I accepted, not rejected.

Hopefully, if other fans rejected the later movies as I did, they can read *The Avengers: The Privileged Few* as canon up until that point. However, for other fans who accept the MCU canon all the way to the end, perhaps this addition is not too much of discontinuation to them and they can slot it within the MCU timeline without having to jump through too many mental hoops.

5.4. Domesticity in *Avengers: The Privileged Few*

Thus far I have discussed how fan fiction gains emotional power from domestic themes and situations, pointing out that popular works such as the MCU and Becky Chambers' (2014) *The Long Way to a Small Angry Planet* have begun to make use of this characteristic despite the possible tensions that may result with the need to create a driving plot. As I began writing *Avengers: The Privileged Few*, I wanted to find a way to combine the strengths of fan fiction with a traditional form, by creating intimacy between readers and characters, which, I hoped, would in turn promote affective learning. In the section that follows, I will discuss two sets of domestic interactions: firstly, how domestic scenes allowed me to explore Natasha's character,

particularly her struggle with sexism, within a broader group dynamic; and secondly, how familiarity and sharing personal stories creates a bond between Deborah and Desiree.

5.5. Domesticity and the Strong Female Character

Domestic settings such as the party scene in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2014) were an inspiration for me as I opened my novel. I wanted to begin with a similar scene that would quickly demonstrate the group dynamics of the team at this particular point in their history and, more specifically, to situate Natasha within that team. In the familiar setting of Stark Tower, readers arguably have more chance of relating to her when they see how Natasha is struggling to find her place:

She [Natasha] never felt as comfortable with them as how everyone was acting with each other tonight though. She parted her lips several times to try to join in, but could never find a way that didn't feel awkward. And when had she ever felt this awkward to the point of not being able to speak? She couldn't remember. (p. 44)

This small moment mimics Natasha's broader journey of finding a comfortable place in the world outside of espionage and patriarchal approval. Some of the domestic values also help illuminate the everyday sexism that Natasha receives. For example, when she and Bruce get into a conversation at the party, she accidentally reveals how her intelligence has either been reduced or overlooked purely because, as a stereotypically beautiful female, her brains are discounted. But Bruce counters this, showing he does not subscribe to the notion:

'Well,' he traced his fingers along the words of his cup again, 'if it was me,' here, he stared into the distance, 'I... I would never use that word to describe you.' (p. 47)

This is not the only time that Bruce does not respond to her in an ingrained sexist manner. Through these small domestic scenes that illuminate typically coded feminine domestic values like affect, warmth and caring, Natasha begins to realize she subscribes to the patriarchal value system of violence and death associated with strength. However, through seeing Bruce enact domestic values like care and warmth,

Natasha sees the worth in those characteristics and questions the double standards implemented on her by men and by herself. This is a big breakthrough for Natasha as she comes into her own as a person outside of unfair value systems that automatically place coded feminine domestic attributes as inferior.

In pursuing this line of writing, I wanted to disrupt the way strong women can sometimes be portrayed as inverted male characters in action films and/or novels, a common trope within the MCU. Many essays in Goodrum, Prescott and Smith (2018), and Hellkson and Busse (2006) explore the different ways female protagonists can be presented as strong rather than just through being an inverted male figure. Nadkarni (2018, p. 78) shows the links between toxic masculinity and militaristic violence where the way to preserve status quo and 'win' is through violent subjugation: 'a nationalistic response that prioritizes patriarchal masculinities is often abusive not only of populations overseas but also of the nation's own people'. Nadkarni (2018) examines the gendered roles of coded masculine violence and militarism compared to the domesticated feminine attributes; like, for example, how the sole way to achieve happiness in romance is usually by wishing for suburban living with a nuclear family. While discussing *Jessica Jones*, Nadkarni (2018, p. 76) points out how Jessica subverts these expectations, rejecting a proposed suburban life to pursue a masculine-coded activity of being a detective 'investigating crime and its attendant violence'. She (2018, p. 76) says that *Jessica Jones* uncovers the hidden abuse within domestic settings that the reigning patriarchy either ignores or perpetrates, disproving the myth of domestic bliss.

While I agree that domestic life often has sites of hidden abuse, I wanted to flip the script here, making the domestic something that Natasha is not so much refusing, but instead, is refusing for herself because she does not believe she can enjoy some domestic spaces, values or scenes in her life while having value within patriarchal society. It is not about her having a secret desire to be a domestic housewife; this is made obvious in all the scenes that Bruce cooks for her, liking the normality and peace of the activity while Natasha hates it even though she is competent at cooking. Instead, these domestic scenes are about Natasha embracing the parts of herself she wants to, not being controlled by patriarchal codes. As examined earlier, affect is framed as a feminine attribute and is therefore discounted or devalued by Natasha as well. However, through her affective learning, she learns she wants to give and receive care (as evidenced by her growing relationship with

Bruce). Una McCormack, with Tim Worthington (2020) on the podcast *It's Good, Except It Sucks*, mentions how *Captain Marvel* (2019) shows the full lives of women on the screen, giving time to the domestic side of life, while also being a superhero. This emphasis does not diminish Carol Danvers' strength. When she and Nick Fury are doing the dishes, in between teasing and trading quips, Danvers explains she upgraded Fury's communication device. Her technical and tactical genius are never diminished, but are instead showcased in the domestic setting as well as showing the everyday struggles she is faced with as a woman (like the misogyny in the air force in the 90s, and being a support person to her best friend and single mother, Maria Rambeau).

Natasha's mingling of domestic values (coded feminine caring, affect and warmth) and her tactical ability (coded masculine violence) are both necessary when she comes face to face with the Hulk at the end of the novel: courage to face the Hulk in the first place then caring for the Hulk to show that she is not there to threaten him. This disrupts the notion that coded feminine domestic values are weak and useless because, in reality, it is Natasha's 'feminine' attributes that 'defeat' the Hulk (i.e., enable her to talk him down and back to Bruce) as opposed to the whole Alia Surat military there trying to take the Hulk down through coded masculine militaristic power and failing miserably. This is done through a domestic scene in which Natasha creates an intimate, warm and affective link with Bruce even in the midst of a battle.

5.6. Positive Group Dynamics and the Ensemble Cast

Thus far I have discussed how domesticity can be a useful tool for developing individual characterisation; however, as Miles (2016, p. 1) notes, characterisation is only one part of the challenge. The other, just as important, aspect is how the characters interact with each other, particularly within large ensemble casts which pose a number of specific narrative challenges. Miles (2016, p. 1) points out the complexity at play when writing about larger groups and how 'a large group won't always have an even interaction ratio'. He argues it is important to place characters together that bring out the most interesting or important storylines through specific character interactions:

There are almost limitless possibilities for character interaction within fiction, new stories to be told, new people to meet, new friendships to form and enemies to battle. Fantasy may show us sweeping stories and grand plots, but it's the characters that we follow through it all. How they deal with each other brings life and humanity to the words. (Miles, 2016, p. 1)

These interactions create the space for intimacy even within a broad-sweeping work as they come to bring out the best (and perhaps the worst) in each other.

As I continued to draft my novel, I asked myself what sort of feelings I wanted to promote as the characters interacted with each other. It didn't take long for me to come to an answer. As I have discussed in other chapters, when I'm having bad bouts of anxiety and depression, I gravitate towards films and fiction that bring me comfort. I watch *Friends*, but only episodes in which no real argument happens. I read fan fiction stories where Tony gets a well-deserved hug (*Tony Stark Needs a Hug* is another popular tag on Archive of Our Own). I personally find comfort in warmth amongst characters where they genuinely like their friends, family and/or partner. There is even a definition now in Urban Dictionary (2020) about a Comfort Character which is defined as: 'A comfort character is when a character, which can be from a TV show, game, book etc [sic] makes you feel safe and happy when upset, sad, down, etc.'. What drew me to these kinds of stories was not only their use of large ensemble casts, but how those characters often demonstrated positive group dynamics.

Positivity can be a powerful storytelling tool. Positive News (2016, p. 1) cites a study that says positive news stories bring people together, create a sense of community and brings more acceptance of others, as opposed to Othering them. A journal article on the power of positivity in psychology by Barbara Frederickson (2001, p. 1) talks about the theoretical 'broaden-and-build' idea that people can build on their positive emotions (through positive interactions or activities that bring them joy) so they can flourish better when they are confronted with negative emotions. Even with people in real life, Julie Beck (2019, p. 1) writes about how a person's 'affective presence' can influence people and how people are more attached to friends that made them feel comforted. The same could be said for fictional characters as well, that readers keep on coming back to characters in situations that we, as viewers and readers, find comfort in. Team leaders have even shown their teams movies that promote teamwork as they believe it helps bring teams together and inspires them to accomplish something amazing together (Teamwork Definition, 2020).

I discussed in Chapter 2 how I aimed to encourage readers to go on a journey of affective learning while still feeling comforted while reading about confronting issues. In Chapter 3, I examined how I wanted readers to identify with a viewpoint other than their own (a non-Western one) and to learn more about Aboriginal history and present circumstances. Positive group dynamics proved to be important for accomplishing both goals. In the first case, characters who found warmth and comfort in their interactions could vicariously experience an ‘affective presence’ as talked about by Beck (2019) when people get attached to real people and form lasting friendships. In the second case, getting readers to learn more about Aboriginal history was made easier with the introduction of the original Indigenous characters. But for this to really work, I had to pair characters with others that would bring out the sought-after reactions.

This wasn’t always easy. In my early drafts, I tried to keep all the interactions and viewpoints even. I originally tried to write each main chapter from the viewpoint of each of one of the six main Avengers. This slowed the storyline and drew too much attention to characters that weren’t central to the story I was telling. To fix this problem, I concentrated on the three original Avengers characters and their relationships that I felt would create the best affective experiences: Natasha and Bruce, Bruce and Tony, and Natasha and Tony. In addition to this, I emphasised key relationships between my original characters: Desiree and Deborah.

As mentioned, one of the most significant set of character interactions takes place between Natasha and Bruce and their changing relationship with each other. When they land in Alia Surat, readers get to see that while Bruce may not trust Natasha, he can’t help but like her and they bond when she helps him find the stone for his panic attack in a emotionally-charged domestic scene: ‘However, there were flashes of the real in Natasha that he couldn’t help but take to’ (p. 101). Natasha only views Bruce as a threat at the beginning, wondering how she can best control him to keep herself safe. As they get to know each other in Alia Surat through domestic feelings and scenes, Natasha begins to realize that he is on her side. When he comes to help her after the bombing at Ludmira, Natasha is shocked but touched at Bruce simply being kind to her: ‘It was a small act of kindness. But for Natasha, it was something more. Because she realized he was just... *doing* this. She couldn’t see an angle’ (p. 171). Natasha no longer sees Bruce as trying to catch her off-guard, but instead, starts to take comfort in his familiarity and kindness without him being after

anything in return. She realizes that Bruce isn't evaluating her in a sexist or predatory manner and instead, is tentatively reaching out for help too, because he is alone as well.

This is poignantly shown when Natasha attempts to contact Desiree and leaves Bruce behind, technically committing treason. When he catches up to her, she realizes she doesn't have to go it alone for once and that Bruce is officially her teammate, perhaps even friend, creating domestic-associated emotions of warmth and comfort:

He didn't look at her, fiddling with the sleeves of his sweater. 'And the last time I checked, I didn't think you needed a contract to be friends.' She didn't have a retort. Bruce had shook her world again, caught her off-guard. Never had she been so happy about that. (p. 200)

This was one of the things that touched me most about their relationship in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), two damaged and lonely people helping to mend each other and make them not feel so alone. This was the way that I, at least, interpreted their relationship and one function of fan fiction is to fill in the gaps that a writer can feel are left unsaid or unspecified (Jenkins, 1992 and 2007; Derecho, 2006; Hellekson and Busse, 2006). Hopefully, the readers will feel a sense of comfort and relief seeing the growing trust and relationship between Bruce and Natasha, the same way I did when first seeing *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015).

Another important and evolving relationship is that between Natasha and Tony. This is very much part of Natasha's arc, realizing she is not as alone as she thinks at the beginning of the novel and she can start to trust some of her teammates. For example, at the beginning of the novel, when Natasha first comes back to Stark Tower with Tony, he offers her a drink. However, she refuses to take it: 'If it was Clint offering, she would have gone for the vodka. "Just make that an apple juice"' (p. 16). This is Natasha's first contact with any of the team outside of Clint and it shows how much she still does not trust them, despite working on appearing perfectly comfortable with Tony. However, at the end, after Tony is part of helping her in Alia Surat, Natasha returns back to Stark Tower to find Tony depressed and drinking. This time, when Tony offers her a drink, she has a vastly different reaction:

He squinted up at her before holding out the bottle.
'Vodka?'

She took it from his hand, saying, 'Sure,' before taking a swig then sitting it on the marble countertop, away from his reach. (p. 236)

While this may seem a small part in the overall novel, it again shows how much Natasha has come to trust her team through domestic values, seeing she could rely on them, so is therefore happy to let her guard down more than she did at the beginning. Again, she is gaining comfort from the people around her and hopefully, the way she relates to her teammates will help readers find comfort in those very characters as well.

5.7. Negative to Positive Dynamic with Desiree and Deborah

Thus far I have discussed how I used and emphasized the positive group dynamics amongst the Avengers in order to allow Natasha to hone her prosocial instincts and resolve the novel satisfactorily. But domesticity is also important for the vital interactions between Deborah and Desiree as Deborah learns to see past her limited viewpoint through interacting with Desiree and finally listening, rather than trying to impose her own culture. Initially their interactions are marked by hostility but the first major turning point comes when Desiree starts to share stories of her mother with Deborah:

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, yes. My mother used to sing this song to me at night. I thought it was sad but she thought it made me happy.' She smiled, full and large, for once showing her teeth. They looked blinding white against her dark skin. 'I couldn't tell her otherwise.'
'Yes,' Deborah nodded slowly back. 'That's... that's exactly it.'
Desiree appeared more excited than sad now. 'What else do you remember?' (p. 91)

This is the first time that Deborah sees past Desiree as her captor and instead, starts to recognize Desiree as not only a human being, but one she connects with. They both care for their families deeply and Deborah is also starting to put together that it is through Desiree she is still alive. At the same time, Desiree is no longer talking to Deborah out of pity; instead, Desiree starts to find a comfort in Deborah's presence and finds she is able to share her past with the white woman without feeling like she has to choose her words carefully.

Their tenuous bond is first put to the test when the Alia Surat army launches a raid against the Indigenous village of Ludmira. When the Nhuungku take in the survivors, Robin, Desiree's best friend, goes to shoot Deborah in a rage after seeing the aftermath and devastation of what Deborah's people have done to the Aboriginal people of Alia Surat. Despite having to help a young woman die with her superpower, Desiree protects Deborah with everything she has: 'Desiree found herself in front of Deborah, folding her body over the other woman's until she didn't know where she began and the other ended. She stared into Robin's barrel' (p. 121). This creates a connection that goes deeper again. Desiree is upset to a point about her attachment to Deborah, but knows deep down that Deborah didn't participate in the Alia Surat army to hurt people like Desiree; she did it because she mistakenly thought she was doing something for the greater good. Still though, it haunts Desiree, but her love for Deborah overcomes her need for revenge.

In the meantime, this selfless act of Desiree's changes Deborah's thinking completely. She realizes she has been operating in ignorance of the very people she mistakenly thought she needed to protect. Instead, she realizes she is part of the problem and pain. Deborah forms a deeper respect for her new-found friend and how Desiree finds it in herself to not hate Deborah, although there are so many reasons for her to. Up until this point, Deborah often says how sorry she is, but never steps up to try to make the deadly situation of Desiree better. However, through watching Desiree's strength, Deborah develops bravery that she never really had before, prepared to stick her neck out to try to save Desiree and the children that she has been part of endangering, even if it was out of ignorance. This is exhibited when Deborah stands up for Desiree to both Natasha and Bruce when she thinks they are there to try to arrest Desiree and the Nhuungku group:

'She is not a terrorist!' she [Deborah] said, getting more amped up the more she talked. The two intruders' expressions were indecipherable but Deborah kept on. 'There is a war and she is on the wrong side of it. The only thing she and the others have ever done has been in defence of their kids.' Deborah stuck out her chin. 'And I don't care if I get labelled as some traitor or crazy. I'm telling that truth.' She looked back at Desiree. 'I'm fighting for you. One way or another.' (p. 202)

The power of Desiree and Deborah's dynamic is the strength they draw from each other and in Deborah's case, how much Desiree has made her a better person. More

than this though, Deborah is willing to become a better one, which is powerful as well. She no longer will hide behind ignorance to be able to justify her actions. Instead, she takes the harder road, going with the children to the U.S. to try to be their voice. Because the sad truth is, both she and Desiree know that people will listen to Deborah, a white woman, more than to Desiree, a woman of colour, despite being the person with the lived experiences. When they leave each other at the end, they know they have permanently impacted each other's lives:

Slowly, Deborah held out her hand. 'Good luck, Desiree.'
Watching the hand, remembering all the ones reaching out of the ground, crevices, bars and past visions, Desiree hesitantly took it before pulling Deborah into a hug.
'Remember my stories,' she whispered. Then, she let go. (p. 222)

While they both leave each other, their relationship, with its evolution from negative to positive, has not only had an impact on the way they view each other, but the way they view the world. Their relationship is life-changing, particularly in Deborah's case, as it changes her for the better and makes her a stronger, wiser person. At the same time, their friendship has made the life-altering revelations easier to bear as Desiree offers Deborah redemption and forgiveness, showing Deborah it is never too late to change. For readers, this positive dynamic will hopefully open the door that it is not bad to change minds and hearts, no matter how long you have been believing an ignorant thing.

5.8. Five Things I Learned Plus One Thing

1. **Do use domesticity to help readers relate to characters.** This is especially useful when the setting is an environment with which the reader is unfamiliar so needs something to anchor to.
2. **Do use a greater weight of Eros as opposed to Thanatos if you want to create a different balance of domesticity and plot.** This is one of the defining characters of fan fiction and made me realize how special that Principle of Pleasure is when creating a warmth towards characters.
3. **Do use domesticity to show value in coded female attributes.** Through writing this, I saw how typically coded feminine attributes are diminished and

found it powerful to give them value rather than ignore them or only frame coded masculine attributes as the ‘powerful’ ones.

4. **Do use positive group dynamics to promote affect and empathy.** Positivity and warmth can create intimacy, comfort and warmth for readers.
5. **Do examine your own relationship with your favourite characters and character relationships.** If you can see what draws you to characters and what reactions certain characters produce in you, this can help you maybe replicate that in your own characterisations.

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6. **Don’t be afraid to incorporate different genre attributes with others they are not normally associated with.** Through my case study of Becky Chambers’ (2014) novel, I saw how effective domesticity (a trope associated with romance, literary or realistic fiction) was put to use in a science fiction novel. This pushes at a genre’s edges, forming something new and exciting, something fan fiction is renowned for and gives a wonderful freedom to explore what can unexpectedly work.

5.9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I examined how I used domestic spaces, feelings and scenes to create affect and relatability towards characters from readers; how I used domesticity to disrupt gendered attributes; and how I used positive group dynamics to further the affective relationship between reader and characters. These last two chapters have been about the techniques I have used to promote the theoretical framework I outlined in the early chapters. The next chapter will sum up what I have covered, what gap I hope this PhD fills, but also, the research areas I think could be expanded upon but that I did not have a chance to examine in this PhD.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

6.1. In the Endgame Now

My introduction began with a provocative question: How can writers draw upon craft strategies common within fan fiction to provoke an affective response to a text that deliberately intervenes in an existing canon? Creative-based research has proven to be a useful methodology for answering it. Through the writing of a hybridized novel set in the Marvel Cinematic Universe—*Avengers: The Privileged Few*—I have developed a framework for affective engagement that builds upon the work of Anna Wilson and models three tiers: affective reaction, affective attachment and affective learning. The last of these offers the potential, I think, for a genuinely transformative experience. The framework allowed me to contextualise my interventions of Aboriginal ways of knowing, a critique of unremarked Whiteness and the exploration of coloured feminism, centring on ownership of women's bodies. This culminated in creating 'more from' (Pugh, 2005) the MCU canon. These added interventions showed me my perspective could be valuable within a world where I previously did not see that I could belong. At the same time, the framework and interventions helped me push at the genre boundaries (Attridge, 2004) of a superhero novel and fan fiction work to see what writing tools I could add to creative writers' toolboxes. The writing tools I experimented with demonstrated the intimacy of free indirect discourse as well as the power of domesticity and positive group dynamics, even within predominantly action-oriented novels.

As with any research project, there are limitations and gaps to my study which could usefully be expanded upon by future scholars of either fan fiction or creative writing. The most important of these, in my mind, were reader reception of affective hermeneutics, the importance of friendship in fan fiction, and a greater understanding of the value of domesticity within fan fiction. Through textual analysis, auto-ethnographic concentration and practice-based methods, I created a paradigm for affective engagement but, given the length of this exegesis, I did not have the space to include reader reception. I would have loved to give a selection of readers several different pieces, some emphasising affective learning while others had more traditional action plots, and asked questions to gauge their emotional reactions to said

pieces. This research would allow a clearer, qualitative sense of how effective different kinds of writing are in evoking the responses I was aiming for. Secondly, my project revealed a substantial gap in scholarship on the topic of friendship in fan fiction. While there is a lot of writing on slash and femslash within fan fiction scholarship (Jenkins, 1992 and 2007; Penley, 1997; Hellekson and Busse, 2006; Goodrum, Prescott and Scott, 2018), it was hard to find studies on the function of friendship in fan fiction. This is despite Gen (non-sexual relationships) playing such a huge part in fan fiction stories, with friendships, familial or otherwise. And lastly, while there have been several studies on domestic spaces in literary fiction, it was rarer to find any study on the function of domesticity within fan fiction. Again, there is room to explore further, particularly given the fact entire subgenres (like Domestic Fic, Curtain Fic or Mundane Fic) are dedicated to domestic spaces and values in fan fiction.

When I started this PhD, one of my aims was to protect myself emotionally—to escape into the scholarship and joys of writing—more than I was able to in my Honours studies. But as I discovered (and indeed as Wilson points out), in the end, it was my feelings which guided me through the process of researching. It was impossible for me not to care about the story and message I wanted to pass on. How could I expect my readers to have an affective learning experience if I withheld my emotional investment and engagement with the material? As much as I have struggled to define ‘affect’ throughout this exegesis, I have to acknowledge there is still something ineffable about it, a visceral feeling that happens to me, beyond my control. I hope it has proven to be an engine for better writing, reaching readers and drawing them into the content, issues and people that I am writing about. Fan fiction has proven to be an emotional safety net for me to explore difficult issues, a source of comfort and understanding. I hope that has come across in my writing as well and that the groundwork I have laid may lead others to pursue fan fiction scholarship within a comforting environment, like it did for me. As readers, academics and writers, the lenses we use to judge texts matter and they often lead to the disregard and under-privileging of forms of knowing with immense value.

I have been honoured to make my voice, as a Barkindji feminist bisexual academic, be heard, and to add my voice to the stories of those Indigenous men, women, non-binary, transgender or otherwise who have come before me and paved the way for me to have access to such institutions and education that allowed me to

make that voice heard. From my personal auto-ethnographic experience of how stories can change and morph lives for the better—seeing that I was seen, heard and represented all those years ago when I saw Tony Stark experience his first panic attack—it has been one of my biggest aims but pressures as well to add to important types of representation and stories where people like me were not present or silenced, carrying on the lineage of fan fiction filling out the margins to make the invisible visible. Another thank you to the academics and fans that have helped bring fan fiction out of the darkness and recognized as a legitimate genre that has unique benefits and techniques that can be used for writing in general.

Writing this piece has helped me realize how much fan fiction's style of emphasising feelings, affect and domesticity should not only be cordoned off to Archive of Our Own, and does have a place in traditional novel formats. Just like in the past, fan fiction can push at the boundaries of published genres, creating something new and exciting (Attridge, 2004). Writing *Avengers: The Privileged Few* helped me feel more confident to increase representation of Aboriginal characters in genres where people who look like me are not present. It can help increase and expand on Indigenous writing and storytelling to more popular culture genres, showing that we belong, even if we have been invisible previously.

It is a cliché, but I will say it has been a journey! This PhD has challenged me, comforted me, improved me, but most of all, made me feel seen and heard. This PhD has changed the way I view fan fiction and its persistent influence on my more traditional original writings as well. It also influenced the way I viewed representation of an Aboriginal, feminist viewpoint and how representation in popular culture genres can potentially create more empathy and reach wider audiences in a gentle, approachable manner. The intention behind my writing pushed me to work harder, to investigate writing techniques, those of fan fiction associated or otherwise, so I could create an authentic commentary on Aboriginal issues, one that ideally will influence hearts and minds.

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