

Who's Going to Tell Them?

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Who's Going to Tell Them?

by [YoureNotDoneFighting](#)

Summary

A series of one-shots centered around Steve and Natasha and the bond they built in the time between the end of Captain America: Civil War in 2016 and Avengers: Endgame in 2023. These short stories are meant to be companion pieces to Step Into the Light.

The One Where Natasha Finds Steve

Chapter Notes

If you came here from "Step Into the Light", welcome! :) If not, you should definitely go read the fic that inspired these stories - It's not totally necessary, but recommended!

May 2016

Wakanda

"You sure about this?" Steve asked tentatively, approaching Bucky who was seated on an exam table while a Wakandan doctor prepped him for cryosleep.

"I can't trust my own mind," Bucky said, smiling wistfully. "So, until they figure out how to get this stuff out of my head, I think going back under is the best thing. For everybody."

Steve rested a hand on his best friend's shoulder and pulled him into a tight hug, "I'll miss you, Buck."

Bucky squeezed him back, then stepped into the cryochamber. Shuri pulled the straps into place across his chest and legs and checked his vitals, "Are you ready?"

He gave her a single nod, then turned to Steve, who was standing next to Shuri with his head hung. Bucky smiled, feeling a true sense of calm for the first time since he could remember, "It'll be ok, buddy."

Steve returned the smile, not wanting Bucky's last memory of him to be one of apprehension. He stepped back, giving Shuri space to lock the chamber. Within seconds Bucky was suspended in cryofreeze, and Steve was alone again.

"We'll figure this out, Captain," she reassured him. "Ayo and I are already working on a deprogramming technique we think will work. In time, he'll be free of everything HYDRA put inside his mind."

Steve inhaled deeply. He'd only recently met Shuri, but he knew her work with science and technology went far beyond anything even Tony or Bruce had achieved. If there was anybody he trusted to make Bucky whole again, it was her.

"Thank you for this."

She nodded and took her leave just as T'Challa entered the lab, "Walk with me, Steve."

He followed T'Challa down a long corridor pausing in front of a wall of floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the city. "Your friend and my father, they were both victims,"

T'Challa said eventually, turning toward Steve. "If I can help one of them find peace..."

He trailed off. Steve stared out the window, into the expanse of the massive city below, not meeting T'Challa's eye. "You know if they find out he's here, they'll come for him."

"He's safe with us," T'Challa said. "Come. There's something I want to show you."

They made their way out to an artillery bay where Oyoke was talking to a blonde woman. Steve glanced at T'Challa as they approached and was confused by the knowing smile on the man's face. It took another moment, but Steve eventually recognized the Quinjet, just before realizing it was Natasha standing there with the Dora Milaje general.

He stopped in his tracks a few paces from her, stunned.

"Happy to see me, Rogers?" Natasha asked, pulling him into a hug.

Her arms around him sent a rush of familiarity and comfort through Steve. He wound his arms around her back, drawing her tight against him. "Hey," he whispered into her hair.

After a few seconds, she pulled back, but let her hands linger against the sides of his arms. She smiled up at him, "I guess that's a yes."

Steve smiled back, still trying to reconcile the last time he'd seen Natasha with the woman standing in front of him now, "What are you doing here, Nat? And... what'd you do to your hair?"

"Uh, it's a long story," Natasha chuckled uncomfortably and tucked the newly dyed blonde strands behind one ear. "But I figured, since we're both on the government's shit list now, we might as well go at it together."

He furrowed his brow in frustration. Natasha had helped him and Bucky escape Germany with the Quinjet, so he shouldn't have been surprised that Secretary Ross had her declared a war criminal, too. He was disappointed, though, that Tony didn't try to stop it.

"This isn't right," he said, shaking his head. "You shouldn't be on the run."

Natasha shrugged, "Neither should you, Steve, but here we are."

T'Challa cleared his throat, "I feel like I should apologize, Miss Romanoff. I'm the one who informed Secretary Ross of what happened at the airport."

She turned toward him without an ounce of ill will in her expression, "There's no need to apologize, T'Challa. I would have done the same thing."

He gave Natasha an appreciative nod and turned to Oyoke, "I'm going to show the Captain and Agent Romanoff to their quarters. Will you please ensure their jet is fueled up and fully stocked with supplies prior to their desired departure?"

"Of course, Your Highness," Oyoke said, then turned back to Natasha. "It's good to see you again, despite the circumstances."

“Likewise, General,” Nat smiled and threaded her arm through Steve’s as they made their way back up to the palace. He stilled, momentarily, at the casualness of her touch but welcomed the warmth her body radiated onto his.

T’Challa led Natasha to a room next to the one Steve had been staying in for the last week. To say it was lavish would have been an understatement. Like most rooms throughout The Citadel, this one had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. Its high ceilings were adorned with traditional Wakandan tribal artwork and ornate chandeliers. One corner of the room was set up like a study, with a plush sofa, stacks of books that lined shelves on the wall, a fully stocked bar and a fireplace. A four-poster king-sized bed with deep red silk sheets was tucked into a far corner.

“I hope you’ll be comfortable here,” T’Challa said, turning to Natasha.

“More than comfortable, thank you,” she responded, walking over to the expansive windows to take in the view.

He turned to Steve, “Captain, please let me know if either of you need anything.”

“We will. Thank you, T’Challa,” Steve said before settling into the sofa. He watched Natasha as she looked out into the city below. It was obvious by the way she ran her fingers across the glass as she walked the length of the room, that she was as taken with Wakanda as he’d been upon first arrival.

“It’s incredible, isn’t it?” she asked, turning to face him, and way the sun light reflected off her face made Steve’s lose his breath.

His eyes locked on hers, “Beautiful.”

Something passed between them in that moment, though after the events of the last few weeks, neither of them was willing to acknowledge it. Steve cleared his throat and quickly changed the subject, “What happened after you left the compound, Natasha?”

She sat down next to him on the couch and rolled her neck to the side, cracking it. Only Clint knew all the dirty details about her past, and though the rest of the team knew she’d been trained by the KGB, Natasha wasn’t sure she was ready to fill in the blanks about the particulars of her former family members or about what had happened in the Red Room just a few days before.

“Right after Germany, I let Ross track me to a train station in Albany, where I ditched my gear, hopped a ferry and ended up in Norway,” she explained, crossing her legs up under her on the sofa. “One of my undercover contacts set me up with a safe house, and I was planning to lay low there for a bit, but an old friend found me and asked for help dealing with some ... things from the past. Ross found me again a couple of days ago, this time in Russia, but I was able to escape. My contact somehow got his hands on the Quinjet, and here I am.”

“You know, I wouldn’t believe that story coming from anyone but you,” Steve said with a shake of his head. “You think Fury had anything to do with the jet?”

Nat shrugged, “I honestly have no idea, but I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Well, I’m glad to see you.” Steve shifted on the sofa, so they were facing one another.

“I couldn’t leave you out here to fend for yourself, Rogers,” she said, winking at him.

“Besides, you’re going to need my help busting our friends out of that damn ocean prison.”

A confused expression passed over Steve’s face, and Natasha realized he had no idea where Sam, Clint, Wanda and Scott were being detained.

“Ross has them on The Raft. It’s a max security prison in the middle of the Atlantic.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Steve threw his hands in the air in frustration. “Does Tony know?”

“He does now, but at the time? No, I don’t think so.” Steve’s jaw clenched, and Natasha put her hand on his knee, feeling him relax under her touch, “T’Challa told me what happened in Siberia.”

“I did what I had to do, and so did he,” Steve rubbed circles into his temples, trying to alleviate the onset of a headache.

Natasha didn’t press him to say more, knowing, that like her situation with Yelena, he’d talk about it in his own time. They had more immediate things to figure out anyway, like how they would break their friends out of an underwater prison.

She studied Steve for a moment, taking note of the yellowing bruises across the left side of his jaw and cheek bone and the cuts above his lip and over his right eyebrow. His usually ridged posture was slightly slumped, just enough that Natasha noticed.

She scooted a few inches closer to him, so her knee pressed into his thigh. The contact jerked Steve to attention, and when he looked up at Natasha, she saw in his eyes everything he’d been carrying the last few weeks – the Accords, Peggy’s death, the fight in Germany, Siberia, Bucky, Tony. He looked exhausted, both physically and mentally, and she decided that any further discussion of the team could wait another day.

“I have an idea,” Natasha said, standing abruptly and making her way to the bar cart stationed next to the massive wall of books. She rummaged through an array of bottles, picking out a brand of brown liquor she’d never heard of, grabbed two glasses and returned to the couch.

Steve raised an eyebrow, “You know I can’t get drunk.”

“Maybe Wakandan booze affects you differently,” Natasha handed him a heavy pour of the golden liquid before serving herself. She held her glass out and clinked it against his. “Only one way to find out.”

Steve chuckled into his glass as he tipped it to lips. The smooth, amber liquid burned on the way down and warmed his insides, and he involuntarily let out a content, low hum.

The sound reverberated through Natasha, and she wasn’t sure if she was more startled by the noise itself or by how much it made her pulse quicken. Maybe drinking with Steve while they

were both in such vulnerable states wasn't such a good idea.

She took a sip from her own glass, chancing a glance in his direction. He was staring at her, his stormy blue eyes locking with hers.

"Definitely a bad idea," she thought, shifting on the couch just enough so their legs were no longer touching. The loss of contact broke the lingering tension, and the two fell into comfortable conversation.

It wasn't until Steve emptied the last of the bottle into his glass that he realized the sun had dipped below the horizon. A glance at his watch told him it was a few minutes past 9 p.m., at least three hours since T'Challa had left them alone. Natasha yawned and stretched beside him, reaching her arms up over her head.

"I can go and let you get some rest," Steve set his glass down on the coffee table, but she caught him by the arm before he could stand.

"No, don't."

He looked over at Natasha. Her cheeks were flushed pink from the alcohol. She'd tied her chin-length blonde hair into a ponytail at the nape of her neck, though a few pieces had escaped to frame her face. The change in her regularly fiery red hair was jarring, but it suited her.

The green utility vest and combat boots she'd been wearing were discarded on the floor, leaving her in socked feet, faded black jeans and a long-sleeved black shirt. She'd always been stunning, but something about the relaxed state of her clothing and the almost innocent look in her eyes made Steve's heart race.

She grabbed her phone and Steve's drink from the coffee table and handed him the glass before she began scrolling through a music app. After a minute, a soft melody filled the room. Natasha leaned into Steve's side, nudging her shoulder into him, and he instinctively brought his arm up around her. The two of them together that way felt new and familiar at the same time.

Nat's head dropped to his shoulder, and he leaned his head back against the sofa and closed his eyes, letting the song seep into him. It was beautiful and haunting and the exact type of music he'd expect Natasha to listen to.

"What is this?" he asked, rolling his head to the side to look at her.

"C'est La Mort by The Civil Wars," she tipped her head up and smiled at him. The alcohol made it difficult to focus on his face, so she squinted slightly.

Steve smiled back at her then closed his eyes again. His head swam, and he wondered if he actually was beginning to feel the effects of the Wakandan-made liquor, "I like it."

Natasha moved herself further into Steve's side, resting a hand flat on his abdomen like it was something she'd done a hundred time before. He could feel her smile where her face

pressed against his chest. They were quiet after that, simply existing together while the music played.

Eventually Natasha's breathing evened out, and Steve realized that she'd fallen asleep. He scooped her into his arms, and pulled back the covers on the bed before setting her down and tucking her in. She stirred slightly and mumbled what sounded like "thank you" before turning onto her side and drifting back to sleep.

Steve pushed a few strands of hair back from her face, letting his fingertips linger on her forehead a moment longer than he should have. He flipped off the lights and turned back toward her upon reaching the bedroom door, whispering into the darkness, "Good night, Romanoff."

The One With the Sketchbook

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2017

Berlin, Germany

After nearly a year on the run, Natasha, Steve and Sam had perfected staying off the grid. Only a select few knew how to reach them - Wanda, Fury and Hill, and given the time Wanda spent with Vision, they had to assume he and Tony knew, too.

They sought out the most secluded hostels, motels and safe houses, never staying anywhere more than a few weeks at a time. It was stressful and exhausting, but it worked. Thankfully, Natasha had recently managed to pull strings with an old contact to land them a safehouse just outside Berlin. It was the closest to comfortable they'd been in months.

On this particular morning, Nat left before dawn to go into town for supplies, hoping to avoid any crowds and the need for an elaborate disguise. Sam usually did supply runs, as he was the least recognizable of the three, but she decided to let the guys sleep in that morning. With a list in-hand and stealth as the objective, Natasha was in and out unnoticed within the hour. She climbed the porch stairs upon her return, expecting to see Steve seated in an oversized chair on the front porch the way he did almost every morning, but he was nowhere to be found. His leather-bound sketchbook, however, was open on the small side table next to a steaming mug of coffee.

She pulled the linen bag full of groceries up higher onto her shoulder and slid the keys to the house from her pocket, glancing over to see what he'd been working on. It was a half-finished drawing of their view from the porch, the sunset coming up over the trees. Smiling to herself, Natasha remembered the first time she saw one of Steve's drawings, right after they'd met in 2012. She found him seated at the back of the control room on the SHIELD helicarrier, hunched over the same leather-bound book. He was drawing Fury and Hill chatting at the command post, the sky filled with fluffy clouds floating outside the aircraft window in the background.

Natasha paused momentarily to watch him. He glanced up every few seconds to take in the scene, brows furrowed together, blue eyes filled with concentration. It was the most comfortable Steve Rogers had looked since she'd met him the day before.

"You're a man of many talents, Captain," Natasha said, approaching him from behind.

Steve looked over his shoulder, startled at her sudden appearance, and closed the sketchbook on his lap. He stood and gave her a polite nod, *"Ma'am."*

"At ease, soldier," she couldn't help but chuckle at his formality. His earnestness was both irritating and endearing. She sat down next to him and gestured toward the book. *"Can I see it?"*

Steve hesitated but flipped through the pages until arriving at the drawing he'd been working on. He slid the charcoal pencil behind his ear, *"Drawing is one of the only things that's kept me grounded these last few months."*

Natasha scanned the page. Though it wasn't complete, the detail and shading were near-perfect. He captured the scene in front of them with life-like accuracy.

"It's really good," she said, sincerely impressed, though something told her she shouldn't be surprised. Steve, in and of himself, was impressive, so it only made sense that his talents extended to things outside of his physical ability.

Steve ducked his head bashfully, trying to hide the blush that crept across his cheeks, *"I appreciate that, ma'am."*

Natasha wrinkled her nose and scoffed, *"You've got to stop calling me ma'am."*

"Sorry, force of habit," Steve said, clearing his throat. *"Agent Romanoff."*

Natasha had the privilege of watching Steve draw many times over the last year, but she never asked to see the full contents of the sketchbook, and he never offered to show her. She suspected there were some pages that were meant just for him.

Just as she was about to slide the key into the lock, a breeze picked up, blowing the book's pages over and exposing a pair of ballet slippers. Natasha's heart leapt into her chest, and she took a step toward the book for a closer look. The worn silk around the toe and slight fraying on the ribbon of the left slipper made it obvious the pair he'd drawn were hers.

"Just go inside, Nat," she willed herself.

Natasha turned back toward the door, but curiosity got the better of her. She set the groceries on the ground and picked up the sketchbook, running her fingertips lightly over the slippers. The page was dated March 2014, back when they were working together at SHIELD. She slid her finger under the parchment, about to flip to the next page when suddenly she felt Steve's presence behind her.

She turned around to see him leaned against the doorframe with his arms folded across his chest. Natasha couldn't help but notice how good he looked in the dark gray joggers that hung low on his hips and lightweight half-zip sweater. The sleeves were pushed up to his elbows and the zipper was pulled down, slightly exposing his collarbone. His grown-out hair was pushed back off his forehead, save for a few pieces that fell into his eyes, and his beard, oh that beard.

Natasha swallowed hard.

Steve nodded toward the book, with a boyish grin that made her stomach flip, *"Go ahead. You can look."*

She raised an eyebrow, *"Are you sure?"*

“To be honest, I’m surprised you haven’t already,” he said, pushing off the doorframe and taking a seat in the chair next to hers.

Nat rolled her eyes, only pretending to be offended, and when she flipped to the next page, her breath hitched. It was her, wearing those same ballet slippers, during one of the few times she’d put them on and danced since leaving the Red Room so many years before. Natasha had no idea anyone, let alone Steve, had seen her in those moments.

She flipped through the next few pages – Arlington Cemetery, a botanical garden, The Washington Monument – until she found herself again. Though still dated March 2014, this time, she was slamming a fist into a punching bag.

“If I didn’t know you better, Rogers, I’d be a little weirded out by these,” she said, meeting Steve’s stare and flashing him that trademark Romanoff smirk.

Steve smiled back at her without a single hint of embarrassment, “The juxtaposition between those two, the elegance and the ferocity, it sums you up pretty perfectly.”

His assessment made Natasha blush, which was no small feat. Steve made a mental note of this and filed it away for later.

“Aw shucks, Steve, that’s nicest thing anyone’s ever said to me,” Though her comment was laced with flirtatious sarcasm, she meant it.

“You’re an easy subject to focus on,” he met her eyes, challenging her sarcasm with sincerity.

Natasha felt her cheeks flush again. Was he ... flirting back? “*Get it together, Romanoff.*”

Before she had a chance to respond, the front door opened and Sam appeared on the porch with his hands on his hips and a scowl on his face, “Are y’all going to sit out here all morning with these groceries, or can I get breakfast started?”

Natasha stood and gathered the bag in her arms, “Why are you always so cranky in the morning, Wilson?”

Sam ignored her jab, spinning on his heel and grumbling something unintelligible as he headed back inside. She chuckled and turned in Steve’s direction to hand him the sketchbook. He accepted it from her, tucking it under his arm, and scooped the grocery bag from her hands.

“Let’s go before he starts burning the toast on purpose again,” Steve said with a wink.

Natasha stared after him, slightly dumbfounded. “Definitely flirting,” she whispered to herself, following him inside.

Sam Wilson interrupting Steve and Natasha's moments since day one.

The One With Steve's Birthday

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

July 4, 2017

Telluride, Colorado

“Stop arguing, Rogers,” Natasha was standing in the small kitchen of their Colorado safe house, pouring batter from a boxed cake mix into a pan. “This is happening.”

“Celebrating my birthday is low on the list of things we need to be worrying about right now,” Steve shot back from his seat at the island in the middle of the room.

Natasha looked up from the cake mix, and rolled her eyes in his direction, “You’re 99 years old today. We’re celebrating.” She swiped a finger across the chocolate batter-covered spatula and popped it in her mouth. “Besides, we all deserve cake.”

“You almost died yesterday,” Steve argued. He crossed his arms over his chest and sat back in his chair. They’d taken on a handful of incognito missions under Fury’s supervision since going on the run, and yesterday’s job had gone sideways almost immediately.

“Nat,” Steve watched Natasha as she licked more batter from her finger, then placed the cake in the oven and set the timer. “We should talk about what happened.”

She leaned forward against the countertop across from Steve and smirked, “If you think yesterday was bad, you should’ve been in Budapest with Barton and me.”

Steve’s expression remained serious. He knew she was trying to get a rise out of him to change the subject, “Natasha.”

She sighed deeply, and sagged against the counter, “Fine. We can talk about it, but only if you let us celebrate your damn birthday.”

He should’ve seen that one coming. He regarded her for a second, coming to grips with the fact that they were going to make a big deal out of today whether he liked it or not, “All right.”

The corner of Natasha’s lip quirked up briefly, “I really am all right, Steve.”

“Maybe so, but I’ve been in the trenches with you for years, and I’ve never seen you so thrown at the mention of a name,” Steve reached across the counter and put his hand on top of Natasha’s. “So, just talk to me, please.”

She swallowed the lump forming in her throat and looked down at Steve’s hand over hers. When she looked back up at him, the hard expression he wore a few minutes before was gone.

“Antonia Dreykov is the daughter of the man who brought me into the Red Room,” Natasha paused and took a deep breath, looking back down at the countertop. “When I was in Russia, right before I found you in Wakanda, I saw her. I thought she and Dreykov had both been killed in an explosion years ago, but I was obviously wrong. He used her, turned her into a brainwashed killing machine. I was able to help her escape though, before Ross showed up and put me in handcuffs. But, when that asshole said her name yesterday, it all came rushing back, and I thought for a second that maybe I hadn’t been able to save her.”

Steve squeezed Natasha’s hand, imploring her to look at him, but he didn’t say anything. She met his eyes and continued, “He knew who I was, so I should have known he was just trying to trip me up. It was that split second hesitation... If you and Sam hadn’t been there, that grenade would’ve blown me to hell.”

“I mean, look at what happened in D.C. when I realized Bucky was the Winter Soldier,” Steve said, shaking his head. “Things like this happen, even to us. I just want to make sure you’re all right.”

“I am, really,” She gave him a small smile. “I checked in with an old contact this morning. Antonia is somewhere in the Maldives, safe.”

“Good,” Steve said, feeling relieved. Before he could say anything else, the timer on the stove dinged, indicating the cake was finished.

Nat’s grin grew as she pulled the pan out of the oven and placed it on the counter to cool. The scent of freshly baked chocolate filled the kitchen, and Steve smiled in spite of himself.

“My goodness, does that smell good,” Sam said, entering the kitchen. He immediately tried to stick a finger in the container of frosting sitting out, but Natasha slapped his hand away, “Ow! Damn woman, was that really necessary?”

She slid the jar of frosting out of Sam’s reach, not realizing it was now right in front of Steve. “Hand me a spoon?” he asked casually.

Without thinking, Natasha reached into a drawer and passed a spoon to Steve, then watched with wide eyes as he plunged it into the frosting, “Don’t you dare, Rogers.”

“But it’s my birthday,” he said teasingly, licking chocolate frosting from the spoon with that signature boyish grin. Natasha felt herself staring at his mouth and forced her eyes away. He slid the container back across the counter to Sam who’d already procured a spoon of his own.

“You two are the worst,” Natasha said, shaking her head and grabbing Steve’s spoon from his hand. She dipped it into the frosting and then into her mouth, “Luckily, I bought two jars.”

The trio sat around the kitchen island, passing the jar back and forth until the cake cooled enough for Natasha to frost it. On top of the chocolate, she spelled out “Happy birthday, old man” in white lettering.

Sam ran into town a little bit later to pick up burgers for dinner and returned with the food and, to Steve's chagrin, party hats and candles.

"Look, Rogers, you might be old, but that doesn't mean you have to be a curmudgeon," Natasha said, pulling a blue and silver paper hat over his head. She placed a black and purple hat atop her own head and passed one with red and yellow stripes to Sam. "See, they're cute."

Steve couldn't help but smile at the fun his friends seemed to be having, even if it was at his expense. He couldn't even remember the last time he'd celebrated a birthday. In truth, it was probably before he and Bucky enlisted and everything in their lives was turned on its head.

He looked over at Sam, who was carefully placing a bunch of small candles into the cake, and couldn't help but laugh, "Please tell me you're not putting 99 candles in that cake."

"You bet your ass I am," he said, without looking up.

"Why didn't you just buy the numbered candles?" Natasha asked.

"Because this is funnier," Sam replied, focusing on the task in front of him.

She couldn't argue with that, "Fair enough."

The 10 minutes it took for Sam to insert and light all the candles was worth it for the video Natasha took of Steve as they sang happy birthday, "Make a wish, Rogers."

Steve glanced at her, and she winked. He closed his eyes and blew out all 99 flames in a single breath.

"Can we please eat this thing, now?" Sam asked, plucking candles from the icing.

"You act like we never feed you," Nat said, cutting a piece of cake for each of them.

Sam, shoveled a forkful into his mouth then patted his stomach, "I'm a growing boy."

Nat rolled her eyes at Sam, then nudged Steve with her elbow, "What'd you wish for?"

He swallowed a bite of cake and quirked an eyebrow, "If I tell you, it won't come true."

Natasha felt her cheeks flush as he tipped his beer bottle back, peering at her from over the edge.

They finished up their cake, and Sam offered to clean up the kitchen, so Natasha and Steve grabbed fresh beers and headed out to the back porch. The sun had just dipped below the mountains, and the evening air had cooled enough that Natasha began shivering slightly after a few minutes. Steve noticed immediately and went back inside to grab a blanket. When he returned, she was watching the video she'd taken of them singing to him. The light from the candles flickered across his face, lighting up the smile that was spread wide across his lips.

Steve's eyes lifted to watch Nat's face as she replayed the video. Something about her expression made his stomach flip. He draped the blanket across her shoulders and sat back down next to her on the porch steps.

"Thanks," she said softly, wrapping the warm material around her. She lifted her face to the sky at the sound of fireworks in the distance, though they could only see a few over the mountain tops. "Captain America being born on July 4 is a little too on the nose, don't you think?"

Steve let out a small laugh and looked over at Natasha, "Why do you think I never celebrate?"

She grinned, her head still tilted toward the sky, "So, was it as bad as you thought it'd be?"

"Way worse," he bumped his shoulder into hers and flashed a grateful smile. "I know I gave you guys a hard time earlier, but I appreciate this, really."

"Well, it's not over quite yet," Natasha said, reaching over to grab a wrapped package from next to her. She placed it into Steve's hands and sat back.

He tugged at the black ribbon tied neatly in a bow at the center of the thin, rectangular gift, and pulled the wrapping away to reveal a black leather-bound sketchbook with S.G.R. embossed in the bottom right corner.

She tilted her head toward him, "I noticed your old pad was running out of pages."

He ran his fingertips across the cover and looked at Natasha, unsure of what to say that would properly express how much the gift meant to him. "Thank you," was all he could manage.

"You're welcome," Natasha leaned in and gently kissed his bearded cheek. The spot where her lips met his skin tingled, and he involuntarily reached up to touch his face. The tension between them was palpable, and neither of them seemed willing to break it.

Finally, Natasha spoke, her voice laced with playful flirtation, "The beard's really growing on me."

"Yeah, you may have mentioned that once or twice," Steve smirked down at her, and tugged a few strands of her short, blonde hair between his fingers. "I kinda miss the red."

"I do too, to be honest," Natasha said, stilling when Steve tucked the hair behind her ear. His fingers brushed against her cheek. Physical contact between them wasn't uncommon, but a gesture that intimate was.

Her eyes fluttered closed involuntarily, and she felt Steve's breath ghost across her face. Everything in Natasha was screaming at her to just close the distance between them, but she was frozen in place. Steve, it seemed, was too. The moment only lasted a few seconds, though it felt like time had stopped. Her eyes shot open at the sound of the patio door sliding open. Steve had already put several inches between them before Sam stepped out onto the porch.

Natasha pulled the blanket tighter around her shoulders, unable to shake the idea of Steve's lips on hers. She chanced a glance at him and was surprised to find he was still looking at her. His blue eyes darkened with an expression Natasha willed herself not to read into, one that went from desire to uncertainty to adoration and back again. She tried and failed to recall another time he'd looked at her that way. What the hell was going on?

They were finally shaken from the moment when Sam, who was either ignoring the obvious tension happening in front of him or completely oblivious to it, exhaled loudly as he sank into a nearby chair.

"Well, Cap, how's it feel to have lived for a century?" he asked, taking a swig from the beer in his hand.

"*Almost* a century," Steve corrected. He shook his head in amusement and threw a cheeky grin over his shoulder at Sam, "And I don't feel a day over 32."

Natasha closed her eyes, listening to the two men banter back and forth. Despite everything that had happened over the last 14 months, the three of them had managed to stay together, to continue fighting for the greater good. It was hard on all of them, staying in the shadows, but it was especially difficult for Steve. Moments like this one, those in between moments when all the bad faded to the background, served as a reminder for why they kept going.

The night around them was quiet and still, and eventually the previous day's mission and their day of celebration caught up with Natasha. She fought to suppress a yawn as she stood.

"You leaving us already?" Sam asked.

"I'm not as young as I used to be," she replied with a smirk. "Good night, boys."

Steve grabbed Natasha's hand as she passed by him and squeezed. The warmth of his palm in hers sparked through her. She squeezed back and smiled down at him, "Happy birthday, Steve."

Chapter End Notes

Edit: I realized several months after publishing that MCU Steve was actually born in 1918, so for the sake of timeline continuity, they celebrated his 99th birthday, not his 100th, as I'd originally written it.

The One About Found Family

Chapter Notes

Apologies for posting a day late. The week got away from me, and I'm just getting caught up. I'm also planning to take a brief hiatus, so I won't be posting this weekend, but I'll be back with a new chapter on 10/23.

In the meantime, here's some Romanogers angst to get your week started. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

February 2018 Budapest, Hungary

Steve closed his eyes dropped his head back onto the headrest of the Quinjet's pilot's seat.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

He'd returned from Wakanda, touching down at the safe house 15 minutes prior, but couldn't bring himself to go inside. He knew Sam and Natasha would have questions, ones he didn't have good answers for.

Did Steve know the trip to see Bucky was a risk? Yes.

Did he know it could expose them? Yes.

Was he thinking about that when he left anyway? Of course.

Did he care in that moment? Not really.

At least, not until he was already in the air and finally took a second to stop and think about what he was doing. It wasn't just Steve's ass on the line, and it hadn't been for a while. But Bucky was, and always had been, his weakness.

When Shuri called, her voice panicked on the other end of the line, to tell Steve that the deprogramming had been causing seizures, he immediately began shoving clothes into a duffle bag. He was too stubborn to listen when Natasha and Sam implored him not to go.

"It's too risky, Cap," Sam said, following Steve out to a wooded area behind the safe house where the Quinjet sat cloaked.

Steve stopped at the edge of the open cargo door and turned to face Sam, noticing that Natasha had followed them out. She hung back a few paces, concern etched across her face.

"It's Bucky. I have to go," he said with a hint of desperation in his voice. "He'd do the same for me."

Sam sighed and scrubbed a hand over his face. They'd heard this argument many times before, and Sam knew when it came to Bucky, trying to reason with Steve was futile.

Natasha stepped forward into Steve's personal space and rested her hand over his where it gripped the straps of his duffle bag. His eyes flickered to hers, and her stomach twisted at the panic in them.

"Steve, you know Ross has eyes on Wakanda. If they spot you before you enter the cloaked airspace, you're screwed."

"I know," he said, steeling his expression. "But I have to go."

"At least let me come with you," Nat offered.

"No."

Steve's response was clipped. Natasha winced at his cold tone and withdrew her hand from his, taking a step back. "Fine," she said, conceding. "Just be careful."

He gave them a nod, walked onto the jet and was gone.

He immediately regretted how terse he'd been with Natasha. It hadn't been intentional, but the only thing he could think about in that moment was getting to Bucky and making sure he was all right.

Now, four days later, Steve was back in Budapest and bracing himself for whatever consequences he may face for his impulsivity. He took a few more deep breaths.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Inhale.

Exhale.

How ever pissed Nat and Sam might be, he would fix it. He had to because, aside from Bucky, they were all he had left. He pushed open the front door and took a step inside. The small apartment was quiet, but the lights were on. He dropped his bag on the kitchen table and went to the sink to pour himself a glass of water.

"I was wondering if you were ever going to come inside."

Steve turned, slightly startled, to see Natasha standing behind him. She was leaned against the hallway doorframe with her arms crossed over her chest. An affectionate grin played on her lips.

"You knew I was back?" Steve dipped his head and cleared his throat. "And you don't seem angry."

"We kept tabs on the jet. And you," she said, sitting down on the sofa. "And no, I'm not angry."

Steve racing heart slowed a bit. "Where's Sam?" he asked.

"He just went for a run," she replied. "I'm surprised you didn't see him pass by while you were hiding out in the Quinjet."

He rolled his eyes and emptied the remaining contents of the glass into the sink, then took a seat on the opposite end of the couch. Unsure of what to say or how Natasha would respond, he began with what was at the forefront of his mind.

"Bucky's OK. By the time I'd arrived, the seizures had stopped," Steve ran a hand through his thick, sandy blonde hair and smiled wistfully. "And by the time I left, it was out."

Natasha raised her eyebrows in surprise and nodded, silently urging Steve to continue.

"The deprogramming Ayo and Shuri came up with worked. It's..." Steve paused, swallowing hard. "It's gone. He's free."

Natasha turned to face Steve, tucking her legs up under her, and reached across the space between them, covering his hand with hers. He flipped his hand over and laced their fingers together, letting the warmth of her skin seep into him.

"For the first time in a long time, Bucky seemed... I don't know, almost happy. Like he could finally rest," his voice was thick with emotion. "He's been fighting for so long, waging this battle between himself and what Hydra made him, and now maybe he can just be Bucky again."

She smiled, "I'm really, really glad for that."

"I just wish I could have done more, or at least been there more while he went through it all," he said sadly. "I've known him my whole life, but sometimes it feels like we're strangers."

Steve rubbed a hand across his bearded cheek but didn't say anything, and Natasha could tell this was something that had been weighing on him for a while.

"Steve, you're doing the best you can," she said, squeezing his hand. "We all are. And maybe it feels like you're strangers because you're not the same people you were all those years ago. But that doesn't have to be a bad thing. It just means that now you have the chance to know one another as you are now and not as you were."

"You mean young and dumb?"

"Exactly," she laughed, relieved that he'd made a joke despite the heaviness of their conversation. "Now you're old and dumb."

He rolled his eyes but couldn't hold back a grin, "Hilarious."

A matching grin spread across Natasha's face, and Steve was suddenly aware of how much he'd missed her during the four days he'd been gone. That feeling was followed by the overwhelming guilt of putting her and Sam at risk, "Nat, I'm sorry."

Natasha didn't hesitate, and when she spoke, her voice was soft. "I know you are, and it's OK."

"I shouldn't have left like that," Steve said, looking down at their hands. "I put us all at risk, and it wasn't right."

"You're right."

Natasha's blunt response was no surprise, but when Steve finally looked up at her there was no anger or disappointment in her expression.

"If I'm being honest, I would've done the same thing if I'd gotten that call about Yelena," she said, fidgeting with the string on the gray hooded sweatshirt she was wearing. Steve's gray hooded sweatshirt.

All the tension he'd been holding onto began to evaporate. He could feel his body relax as he sunk back against the sofa, "You never really talk about her."

"Yelena and I are... complicated," Natasha released Steve's hand and rubbed apprehensively at the back of her neck. "And a lot of that is my fault."

"You don't have to talk about it," Steve said, nudging her knee with his own. "But I'd love to hear about her, if you want to tell me."

Natasha briefly imagined Steve meeting her sister and couldn't help but smile at the thought of her two favorite people in the same room. It was instantly something Natasha knew she wanted to happen.

"You'd love her," Nat said, chuckling lightly. "She's smart and kind and blunt and so funny. She loves with such ferocity. She'll stare down the barrel of a gun without flinching but is deathly afraid of lightening. And at a time when I felt the most alone, she reminded me what it meant to have someone in my corner, unconditionally."

"The two of you sound a lot alike," Steve said. The low tone of his voice and the intensity in his eyes made Natasha's stomach do cartwheels.

"Are you flirting with me, Rogers?" she asked, shooting him a wry smile.

He sighed softly and shook his head, "Don't deflect, Nat."

"Don't act like you know me," Natasha said cheekily.

"I do know you, Romanoff," Steve said, smirking.

Natasha resisted the urge to roll her eyes. It was irritating how well Steve knew her, and it was even more irritating that she kept letting him chip away at the walls she'd spent her entire life building up.

"I'm not like her, not really. Yelena never gave up on me or on us, even when I let her down," she exhaled a shaky breath. "Everything I did during the years we spent in Ohio was to protect her, but I failed at that. When I got sent back to the Red Room in '95, they sent her off to God knows where, and nobody would tell me anything. She was only six, Steve. She was so scared, and I couldn't help her. I couldn't keep her safe. I couldn't do anything except comply."

Steve could feel his heart pounding in his chest as Natasha shared her story; She'd kept her past so close to the vest for so many years, and now she finally trusted him enough to share it all.

"When I got out and joined SHIELD, I thought about trying to find her; Clint even offered to help. But nothing had changed, not really. I'd failed her when we were kids, and by then I figured she didn't need me anyway, so I pushed it away, convinced myself that it really was just a cover back then, and I kept moving. I never stopped thinking about her, though, or worrying or wondering where she was or who she'd grown up to be. There were moments when all I wanted to do was cram into a sleeping bag with her, the way we did when we were young, and search the sky for constellations."

Natasha paused and looked down at her hands in her lap then back up at Steve, whose focus was locked on her. She wanted to reach for him, grab his hand or lean into him – something, anything – but she couldn't make herself move. He didn't say anything, so she continued.

"Then Avengers came along and gave me a little bit of hope for the family I thought I'd never have. Sure, we were dysfunctional and spent more time than not wanting to kill one another, but it was special. At least it was to me," she paused again when Steve shifted closer to her on the sofa, draping his arm across her shoulder and pulling her to his side.

He ran his hand lightly along her arm in a comforting manner. Natasha's breath hitched at the contact, but she kept going.

"For a while, it felt like I was finally where I was supposed to be, but after the Accords and the airport, my faith in that kind of wavered. I thought maybe I'd made it all up to make myself feel like I belonged somewhere. When Yelena found me, I was ready to put the team behind me and go it alone for as long as I needed to. But she's stubborn, and she forced me to admit that I was running instead of fighting. She's the reason I came to find you in Wakanda."

Steve's hand stilled against Natasha's arm, and he made a mental note to thank Yelena if he ever had the opportunity.

"You didn't fail her. You just lost your way for a little while," Steve looked down at Natasha at the same time that she tilted her head up to meet his eyes. "Yelena convinced you not to give up on her or on yourself or on us. I bet if I asked her who taught her that kind of determination, the answer would be you."

Natasha sat back slightly and stared up at Steve wordlessly. It didn't matter how hard she tried to keep him at arm's length, he always managed to pull vulnerability from her when no one else could. Steve saw her, really saw her, for who she was instead of who she believed herself to be.

She didn't even realize she'd started to cry until Steve swiped a tear from her cheek. "What is it?" he asked, furrowing his brow.

"I miss her, so much," Natasha's voice broke, and she rested her forehead against the top of his shoulder, unable to hold back the wave of sobs that began to wash over her. She felt Steve's arms around her and sagged into him.

He curled one arm around her back, the other cradling the back of her neck. Natasha cried silently with her face pressed into his solid chest and her hands clutched in the soft fabric of his shirt. Steve wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, but he didn't move until he felt her hands loosen from his shirt.

Natasha drew in a shaky breath, "Well, that was embarrassing."

Steve's hands framed her face, gently drawing her glassy gaze up to meet his eyes. "You have nothing to be embarrassed about."

"The wet spot on your shirt says otherwise," she sighed heavily and gave him a tight, sad smile that made Steve's heart clench in his chest.

He brushed the hair back off her face, letting his hand linger a moment, and Natasha leaned into his touch, "Thank you, Steve."

"For what?" He dropped his hand from her face, immediately missing the feel of her skin on his.

"For this," Natasha said, gesturing between them. "For everything."

She didn't need to elaborate; Steve understood.

For as close as he and Sam were, and as much as they relied on one another, his bond with Natasha was born out of something else. Even early on, they shared a connection neither of them could really explain. Sometimes Steve wondered if maybe it ran even deeper than either of them were willing to admit.

Maybe one day when they weren't running from the government or fighting a planet-ending threat or cleaning up each other's messes he'd ask her. And maybe she'd tell him that, yeah, she felt it too.

Maybe one day.

But not today.

Chapter End Notes

If you're curious about how Steve and Yelena meeting for the first time actually went, go read Chapter 14 of Step Into the Light. Or... just read the whole thing. *shameless plug*

The One Where Thanos Snaps Half the Universe

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for [notes](#)

April 2018

Wakanda

Natasha struggles against the tree roots that wrap around her arms, legs and waist, leaving her completely immobilized. An angry scream tears from her throat as she struggles against her makeshift prison, and she strains her neck - the only part of her body she can actually move - to see what's happening in the fight all around her.

From the corner of her eye, Natasha sees the bright red glow of Wanda's magic as she works to destroy the Mind Stone inside Vision's head, and her chest constricts knowing his death is inevitable. The tree roots are wound so tightly around her that her vision begins to blur, and she suppresses a bitter laugh. "All the shit I've been through, and this is how I'm going to die," she thinks idly.

The last thing Natasha remembers before the green of the tree canopy above her fades to black, is Steve darting past toward Thanos, and the clash of his shield against the Titan's armor. When she opens her eyes again, she has no idea how much time has passed; only a few minutes she suspects, but when the world around her comes back into focus, it's enough to know they've lost. No longer bound, Natasha pushes herself to her feet and looks around. Warriors from both sides are turning to dust all around her, and she's unable to quell the panic bubbling up inside her at the implication of what that means.

She holds her shaking hands out in front of her, checking to make sure she's still corporeal, and her next thought - the only thought that matters in that moment - is finding Steve and making sure he's still alive.

Familiar voices ring out at her six, and she sprints back toward a clearing in the wooded area where they'd been trying to protect Vision. When Natasha rounds the corner, she sees Steve on the ground and is overcome with relief that he's seemingly OK. She takes a few more steps toward him, and stops in her tracks when she sees that he's kneeling next to Vision's gray, lifeless body. A wave of nausea flows through Natasha as the realization of what's just happened turns her to cement. She wraps an arm around her stomach, as if that will keep her insides from spilling out, and looks around; Besides her and Steve, the only ones left are Bruce, Thor and Rhodey.

"What is this?" Rhodey asks, looking around incredulously. "What the hell is happening."

None of them answer because they already know. Natasha hears a slight rustling sound and her attention is pulled back to Steve when she sees that he's now sitting on the ground. He huffs out a few heavy breaths, and when he says, "Oh, God..." it's as if time has stopped.

Immediately, she begins making mental note of who's missing - Bucky, Sam and Wanda - and her heart seizes in her chest. A gust of wind pushes through the trees, and Natasha feels unsteady on her feet. The hand not gripping her stomach finds Steve's shoulder for balance. It almost works, until her thoughts begin to wander beyond those there on the battlefield.

Yelena's face flashes in Natasha's mind, then Clint's, and her knees buckle at the possibility that her sister and her best friend are gone. She doesn't even realize she's fallen to the ground until Steve's hand finds hers, gripping her fingers like a vise between his own. Natasha's eyes meet his, and she knows the tears that track down the dirt and blood on his face mirror her own.

They stay like that, motionless and in shock, until Okoye's screams pierce through the tree line. The Dora Milaje general comes barreling into view, shouting that T'Challa is gone. Steve is on his feet now, hauling Natasha with him. What's left of their enemy has retreated back to the skies, and next several hours feel like an out-of-body experience as they search for survivors and take tally of everyone's they've lost. Natasha doesn't leave Steve's side; he'll never say it, not when the rest of the team needs him to be strong, but she knows losing Bucky and Sam has him shaken to his core. She can see it in his eyes. Once ocean blue, bright and shining, they're now dulled with pain, sadness and failure. She can see it in the way his shoulders hunch forward ever-so-slightly. And she can hear it in his voice; His strong, calming voice is now little more than a whisper, cracking with emotion even as he tries his very best to hold it together.

It's for this reason, and this reason alone, that Natasha doesn't let herself think about Clint or Yelena, or even Tony, who no one has heard from since this all began. Not until the work in front of them is finished. It's well past midnight when they finally drag themselves inside The Citadel, disappearing into the rooms Queen Ramonda so graciously offered to them for the night, despite having lost both her children just a few hours earlier.

The first thing she does when she hears the latch on the door click shut is dig her phone out and dial Yelena's number. It rings three times and goes to voicemail. She calls again. And again. And again. Though she already knows the awful truth, she tries one last time. When the voicemail picks up this time she leaves a message that her sister will never hear. With shaking hands, Natasha unzips her vest and slings it over the back of a chair near the bed. She discards her boots, gloves and weapons next to the chair, then peels her widow suit from her body, wincing more than once as the thick material sticks to dried blood from cuts on her arms and legs.

She turns the shower on and steps inside, gasping as the hot water beats down on her battered body. Steam fills the bathroom, and after several minutes of scrubbing dirt, blood and grime from her skin and hair, Natasha sits down on the tiled shower floor, curling her knees to her chest. For the first time since this all began, she's alone with her thoughts, and it's overwhelming. Before she can stop it, a wave of heavy sobs rips from her chest. Natasha wraps her arms around her knees, tucks her face into them and cries for Yelena. She cries for Sam and Wanda and Bucky and Vision.

A light tap at the bathroom door startles her, and her head whips up at the sound of Steve's voice on the other side, "Hey... Are you all right?"

She swipes a hand over her face, salty tears and water mixing on her cheeks, and clears her throat. When she speaks, her voice is hoarse, "Uh, yeah. I'll be out in a minute." Natasha knows Steve's going to want to talk about what's happened, and she'd much rather stay under the warmth and safety of the scalding hot water. But she also knows if she doesn't come out, he won't hesitate to come in, so she stands, turns the shower off and pulls on a soft, fluffy robe.

When she pulls the door open, Steve is standing on the other side looking about as miserable as she feels. His eyes are bloodshot, and the beginnings of a bruise blooms violet across his left cheek. All she can manage to say is, "Hey."

"Hey," his voice is no louder than a whisper, but it's all the permission Natasha needs to close the distance between them. She wraps her arms around Steve's waist and presses her face to the cool cotton of his tee shirt. His arms wind around her shoulders, and she feels herself sink deeper into his embrace when one hand finds its way into her wet hair, cradling the back of her head. She knows he can feel water and tears seep through his shirt, but she doesn't care. It's not the first time Steve Rogers has seen her fall apart like this, and she's certain it won't be the last.

"How did this happen?" Natasha asks after a few minutes, finally pulling back to look at him. The question is rhetorical, but the look on Steve's face tells her he's spent the last 24 hours trying to figure out that very thing.

He drops his hold on her and scrubs a hand down his bearded face, "I... I don't know, Nat. I have no idea."

Natasha can tell he's about as close to breaking down as she'd been a few minutes prior, so she takes his hand and leads him to the King bed in the middle of the room, pulling back the plush comforter and sliding underneath. Steve hesitates for the briefest of moments, then gets in next to her, the need for Natasha's comfort winning out over all else. He moves to the middle of the bed and pulls her down next to him, exhaling a shaky breath as she rests her head against his shoulder and her hand on his chest. The feel of Natasha's body curled into his and the pressure of her palm just over his heart is like an anchor, and he immediately feels a little bit more like himself.

"I talked to Clint," he says, leaning his head forward to press a kiss into her still damp hair. "He called while you were in the shower. Must not have been able to reach you."

Natasha turns to face him, propping herself up on one elbow. Her eyes are wide and filled with relief, "He's ok?"

Steve's heart breaks knowing her relief will be short-lived. "He's ok. But Laura and the kids... they're gone."

"Fuck..." she whispers. Her eyes squeeze shut, and she takes several deep breaths - an attempt to temper the sudden rage building inside her.

Steve must notice the shift, because he stills the hand that had been rubbing slow circles into her back. He doesn't say anything for a few moments, and neither does she, until finally the

silence is too much to bear.

"Has anyone heard from Tony? Do we know where he is or if he's even still..." Natasha doesn't finish her thought, but she doesn't have to. Steve's been wondering the same thing.

"No," he says quietly. "There's been no contact. Pepper hasn't been able to reach him since he boarded that space ship. Apparently the kid is missing, too."

"The kid?" Natasha sits completely upright now, and her eyebrows pull together in a brief moment of confusion before realization hits. "Oh, shit. Parker?"

Steve sits up, too, and slips Natasha's hands into his. He's unwilling to break the contact between them, still afraid that if he lets go for too long, she might disappear. "We might have something to go on, though," he says, his eyes sliding up to meet hers. The turmoil he sees in them is jarring, so he hesitates, knowing this bit of good news will be quickly tainted with more bad.

She stares back at him expectantly, "What, Steve? What is it?"

Steve looks away, remembering how Natasha reacted the last time she found out Nick Fury was dead.

"Jesus Christ, just tell me," she snaps, her patience worn straight through. But as aggravated as Natasha is, she knows it has nothing to do with Steve, and she immediately regrets her tone, "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to..."

"No, it's ok," he says, squeezing her hands in his. "Fury's gone, too. And Maria."

Natasha freezes in place. Her heart is hammering behind her ribcage so hard she thinks it just might burst from her chest. She feels her cheeks burn with a tingling heat, and a low humming sound taking up residence inside her head. This cannot be happening. Fury is gone. Yelena is gone. And she is left here to pick up the pieces. Her voice is void of all emotion when she speaks again, "Tell me the rest."

Steve's chest squeezes, knowing Natasha is long past the point of being strong for anyone's sake. If there was anything he could do to shield her from this pain, anything at all, he'd do it. But Steve knows the only thing they can do right now is press on. "Before he... before it happened, he sent out a signal from some sort of transmitter to someone named Carol Danvers. Have you heard of her?"

Natasha responds with an almost imperceptible shake of her head, so Steve continues, "She's apparently former Air Force who became enhanced after she was exposed to energy from the Tesseract. Fury met her in the 90s and gave her the transmitter."

"Where's she been all this time?" Natasha asks, forcing herself to focus on the conversation and on Steve. Her eyes skate over him, over the swollen, angry bruise on his cheek, a stark contrast to the unusually ashen tone of his complexion. His shoulders are hunched forward. Scrapes and shallow cuts blot the skin along his bare forearms, down to his knuckles. She

wonders where else Steve might be injured and has to stop herself from reaching out to lift the hem of his tee shirt to check for herself.

"Off-planet is my guess," he says, clocking the way she's looking at him and pushing it to the farthest corners of his mind. "Bruce got a call from Pepper right before I talked to Clint. Danvers showed up at the compound out of nowhere with the transmitter. I don't know much more than that, just that she thinks she can track the homing beacon on the raccoon... Rocket's ship."

"How's that going to help us find Tony?"

"It might not, but Thor said the rest of that crew was looking for Thanos, too. Maybe they crossed paths at some point."

Natasha lets out a heavy sigh, "It's a long shot"

"It's all we've got to go on," Steve shrugs, knowing she's right.

"All right, so what do we do?"

"We go home and talk to Danvers. We find Tony, then we find Thanos. We get the stones; and we bring everyone back," As he speaks the words, Steve is trying to convince himself as much as he's trying to convince Natasha.

She rubs at her temples, an attempt to fend off the headache that's been creeping in all day, "Is that even possible?"

"We won't know unless we try."

Steve's unwavering optimism, however well-meaning, is beginning to wear on Natasha, so she gives him a nod then stands up from the bed. The finality of it is an indication that she needs the conversation to be over, and thank God he's come to know her well enough to understand.

He stands, too, and reaches for her hand, "Try to get some rest."

"I'm not going to be able to sleep," Natasha's heart begins to pound again. She wants the conversation to end, but she doesn't mean for it to be Steve's signal to leave.

"Neither am I," he says, rubbing at the back of his neck. He doesn't want to leave, and he doesn't think she wants him to. But he's letting Natasha take the lead now.

And she does. "Will you stay with me anyway?"

Steve lets go of a breath he didn't realize he was holding and smiles at her, "Of course."

Natasha retreats back to the bathroom to change out of the robe she's been wearing, returning in a pair of shorts that are hidden beneath the depths of an old tee shirt she stole from Steve. He's already under the covers, still wearing joggers and a tee shirt even though she knows he gets too hot when he sleeps fully clothed. She's told him over and over that it's fine if he

wants to take the shirt off - and in reality, she'd prefer it. Being pressed against Steve's bare chest while they sleep is enough to unravel Natasha, but she'll never tell him that. He always declines, though, never wanting to cross the unspoken boundaries that they're both aching to leap over.

She slides in next to him, settling against the length of his body the way she's done dozens of times over the last two years. Something about this night feels different though, like the stakes have been raised somehow. She refuses to think too much about it, chalking the feeling up to the loss they've both just experienced. But when his arm tightens around her back, shifting them both onto their sides so they're facing one another, a flutter rises in Natasha's stomach. Even in the dark, Natasha can see the way Steve's eyes bore into hers. She can't really decide what the look on his face means until his gaze shifts, almost imperceptibly, to her lips.

Their faces are just inches apart, so close their noses nearly touch on the shared pillow. All Natasha would have to do is tilt her face up ever-so-slightly and her lips would be on his. She's thought about kissing him so many times, had so many opportunities, and after what's happened today, she doesn't think she cares much at all about the potential fall out. It's not of her own volition when she reaches up and rests a hand against his bearded face, trailing her short nails down the length of his jaw. Steve releases a shuddering breath, and his arm tightens around her waist, pulling her flush against him.

"Do it, Steve," she breathes, moving her face just enough that her upper lip ghosts over his. "Please."

There's no space between them, and for a split second, Natasha thinks he might actually kiss her. She knows he wants to. She can see it on his face, hear it in the thumping of his heart and feel it pressed into her hip. And then his grip on her loosens just enough that she knows he's letting the moment pass.

"I... I can't," he says. His voice is tight. "Not like this."

Natasha gives him a tender, closed-mouth smile to let him know that she understands, "I know. It's ok."

The tension leaves Steve's body, and he smiles back then presses a lingering kiss to her forehead. That will have to do for now. "Sleep, Natasha."

Natasha shifts so her head rests on his chest again, but she doesn't sleep, even after the steady rise and fall of Steve's chest tells her that he's drifted off. She stays awake into the early hours of the morning, until orange and pink hues of the dawn cast shadows through the bedroom window. Finally, when the sun is too high in the sky to ignore any longer, Natasha reaches for his face, pushing back the grown out hair that's fallen onto his forehead. She knows her touch will stir him. Steve blinks a few times, adjusting to the sunlight, and his eyes lock on hers.

"We should get moving, get back to the compound," she says, still running her fingers through his hair.

"Yeah," Steve closes his eyes again, reveling in her touch. He knows as soon as they retreat from the comfort and safety of those four walls, everything they left behind the night before will be waiting on the other side.

She can sense the reticence in his voice; it mirrors how she feels on the inside, "You ready?"

"No," he says quietly, finally meeting her eyes again. They're filled with pain and desperation, and Steve wonders if there will ever be any room for just the two of them.

Natasha leans forward, pressing her forehead to Steve's. Their hands are locked together tightly in the space between their bodies, "Neither am I."

Chapter End Notes

As always, I live for your love and comments, so leave them down below! xoxo.

The One Where Steve Finally Breaks Down

Chapter Notes

This is a fleshed-out version of a flashback in Chapter 1 of Step Into the Light.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

June 2018

Avengers Compound, Upstate New York

Natasha's phone pinged on the desk in front of her with a text from Rhodey that read, *"Touching down in 5."*

Steve and Rhodey's mission that day had been cut and dry. They went to clear trash and old personal belongings from an orphanage in New York City that was abandoned after the Blip, to help the city prepare it for redevelopment into affordable housing for people who were displaced.

After the team found and killed Thanos, and Tony, Thor and Bruce went their separate ways, the ones who were left pressed on and continued to work leads. The collateral damage was staggering, and both Natasha and Steve made it their mission to help as many people as they could in whatever ways possible.

Natasha made her way down to the hangar, rounding the corner in time to see Rhodey enter the compound. He tossed his helmet onto a nearby table, and they locked eyes. He said nothing, but the look on her friend's face made Natasha's heart drop into her stomach.

"Rhodey?" she asked, her voice laced with concern and confusion.

He brushed her off with a shake of the head and hurried past her toward his quarters. She was about to turn and go after him when she noticed Steve standing in the doorway. His face was ashen, and the vacant look in his eyes was one Natasha hadn't seen in a long time.

She started toward him, reaching out a hand to grasp his arm when she realized he was leaning all his weight on the doorframe. He immediately sagged into her and began to sob.

Natasha's arms went around Steve, and he clung to her so tightly that she could barely support the weight of his muscular six-foot frame. She pulled him down to the floor, tucking his head into the crook of her neck.

"Steve, what's going on?" she asked softly. "What happened?"

He took a few deep breaths and leaned back slightly to look at her. Natasha had seen him cry before, mostly recently during those first few days and weeks as they mourned the loss of

their friends, but it paled in comparison to this. Steve Rogers was resilient, stoic and hopeful on any average day, but the man in front of her now was more broken than she ever thought possible.

She waited for him to say something, anything. When he didn't, she stood, pulling him with her, and led him to her room. Natasha sat next to him on the bed and began helping him out of his uniform. If he wouldn't talk, she would at least make sure he was comfortable. She pulled the gloves from his hands, followed by his boots. She tossed them aside then started on the zipper at the collar of his suit. It was then that Steve seemed to snap out of the trance he was in. He grabbed her hand from the zipper and pressed it to his lips.

"Thank you," he whispered against her palm. "I've got it."

Natasha searched his eyes, unsure of what to do or say. Steve stood, shrugging the suit from his body, leaving him in just a white tee shirt, socks and boxer briefs. She turned away, suddenly uncomfortable seeing an already emotionally vulnerable Steve in that state of undress.

She rummaged through her dresser looking for a pair of sweatpants she'd stolen from him a few years back. When she turned back to face him, he was sitting again, with his head in his hands. She dropped the pants on the bed next to him, and draped an arm over his shoulder, pulling him to her side. His arms immediately went around her waist, and she could feel his entire body shaking against her.

"Steve, please tell me what happened."

He sat up and silently pulled the sweatpants on, then wiped the tears from his face and took a deep breath, "You knew the mission. We were supposed to be meeting a few city officials and some volunteers to help clear the place out, but when we got there, we could tell something wasn't right. There were police and an ambulance, and when we went inside, we found the bodies of seven kids."

Steve choked on the last few words as more tears threatened to spill from his eyes. A wave of nausea washed over Natasha, and she swallowed the lump that had formed in her throat, knowing she couldn't fall apart while Steve struggled to keep it together.

"We checked The Vanished registry for the names of the people who ran the orphanage," he continued, his voice barely above a whisper. "They'd all dusted. Those children starved to death, alone and scared."

"Jesus," Natasha murmured lacing her fingers with Steve's. She wasn't sure if it was meant to comfort him or herself. "I don't... I don't even know what to say."

"This. This was Thanos' brilliant plan for the universe. Children are dead, and for what?" Suddenly, Steve was on his feet, the anguish in his eyes replaced with fury. "How many people, how many children have died or will die because the people they depend on were taken? How many were left alone without a family or a home? How are we going to help them all?"

She knew these were all rhetorical questions, but the more Steve's anger grew, the more it felt like a brick was settling in Natasha's gut. She closed her eyes and pressed the heels of her hands into her forehead, completely caught off guard when he let out a guttural yell. Natasha's eyes snapped open as a water glass from her desk hit the opposite wall and shattered. She was on her feet in an instant, tugging him back toward the edge of the bed.

"Hey, come here," Natasha sat again, and Steve followed, pulling them horizontal and curling into her. Her arms went around him instinctively, and without a second thought, she began to cord her fingers through his hair. Steve's face pressed into her collarbone, and Natasha could feel his hot tears soaking through her shirt and onto her skin.

She wasn't sure how long they stayed that way, and it was a long while before either of them spoke again. Once Steve's breathing evened out, and Nat was sure he'd stopped crying, she pulled him up, so they were eye-level and wiped the remaining tears from his face. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, and Natasha's heart clenched in her chest at the pure vulnerability of the moment.

When Steve looked at her again, his eyes swam with all the pain he'd been carrying for months. He reached for her, resting a hand at the nape of her neck, and for a brief moment, Natasha considered kissing him. Instead, she leaned forward on her pillow and pressed her forehead to his. Steve's skin was cool to the touch, but the contact sent a familiar jolt of comforting warmth through Natasha.

"You're ok, Steve," her breath ghosted across his face, sending a visible shiver through him. "I've got you."

Natasha stayed awake, running her fingers through Steve's hair until she heard the tell-tale sound of his soft snores, before finally closing her eyes and drifting off too.

When she awoke the next morning, she was surprised, and a little disappointed, to find the other side of the bed empty. She sat up and stretched then looked around to see Steve's suit was gone, too. Natasha dropped her head back onto the headboard and sighed. She probably shouldn't be shocked that he would want to be alone after the events of the previous day.

A moment later, she felt the bed dip down, and when she opened her eyes again, Steve was sitting next to her with two cups of coffee. He held one out to her, and she accepted it with a grateful smile.

Steve took a slow sip from his mug and scooted in next to Natasha, so their shoulders and legs were touching. He looked down at the drink in his hands then up at her, "I don't know how to thank you for yesterday."

"Steve, you know you don't have to thank me," she studied his face. His eyes were a bit puffy and bloodshot from crying, and the usually vivid blue irises appeared slightly dulled. "You'd do it for me. You have done it for me."

"No, I know," he took another sip of coffee, and looked toward the ceiling. "I just... I feel like that was a lot to put on you. I honestly have no idea what I would've done if you hadn't been there when we got back."

Natasha nodded and gave Steve a sad, understanding smile. She, unfortunately, knew exactly what he meant. Over the years, they learned to lean on one another in a way neither felt they could do with anyone else on the team. That bond, the trust they put in each other, only deepened during their years off-grid. It was something that happened so naturally, that there was never any questioning it. They had gradually, albeit unintentionally, begun to heal one another. Natasha could count on one hand the people she couldn't live without, and Steve Rogers was at the top of that list. She never doubted that, if she asked, he'd say the same about her.

"I told you, Steve, I've got you," she said, resting her head on his shoulder.

Steve's body relaxed against hers, and he let out a breath he felt like he'd been holding for weeks. He pressed a kiss into her hair, unable to stop the small smile that spread across his lips. He wasn't OK, and she probably wasn't either. But Steve knew as long as they had each other to lean on, they would weather the storm.

Chapter End Notes

I know. I know. This chapter was even angstier than the last (is there ever really too much angst though?). I promise the next couple will be a bit more cheerful for our favorite duo.

The One With Christmas at the Compound

Chapter Notes

Once again, apologies for being a couple days late with the new chapter. Life's been a little wild lately (in a good way), and I appreciate your patience.

As promised, here's some fluffy goodness to make up for all the angst.

December 2019

The Avengers Compound, Upstate New York

“Nat, something came for you,” Steve called, holding up an envelope with her name on it as he walked into the kitchen where Natasha was assembling peanut butter sandwiches. He glanced down at the heaping plate then quirked an eyebrow at her. “Expecting company or just really hungry?”

“You’re so funny,” Natasha said wryly, swiping the envelope from Steve. She licked the knife clean and dropped it in the sink. “Rocket and Carol are on-planet, so they’re popping in to talk about what’s been happening out on their side of the universe.”

Steve smirked, replacing the lid on the peanut butter jar before putting it back in the pantry, “So, we’re spoiling them with Earth’s finest?”

Nat took a bite of a sandwich and rolled her eyes, “You know I hate cooking. Besides, the raccoon will eat anything.”

“You have a point,” he grabbed the plate and followed Natasha into the living room where she was already reading the mail that had arrived for her. “What is it?”

“It’s a Christmas card,” she closed it and paused before meeting Steve’s eye. “From Tony and Pepper.”

“Ah,” Steve wasn’t surprised that he hadn’t received a similar gesture; after all, he and Tony hadn’t spoken more than a handful of words in years. He’d be lying, though, if he said it didn’t hurt. At the very least, Steve was glad Tony and Natasha managed to mend fences. “How are they? How’s Morgan?”

“They’re good. She’s already started walking, so naturally Tony’s convinced she’s a child prodigy,” Natasha laughed and passed a photo of the smiling trio to Steve.

At just under a year old, Morgan was already a spitting image of her father. The dark hair, chocolate eyes and mischievous smile were Tony Stark through and through. The girl had a kindness about her, though, that was unmistakably Pepper. As Steve studied the photo, he

was unable to hold in a smile of his own. Despite the rift, Steve couldn't deny that it made him happy to see Tony raising a family of his own.

"They look happy," he said, handing the picture back to Natasha.

She set it and the card on the coffee table and turned toward Steve, "Come with me on Christmas Eve."

He ran a hand across the back of his neck and shook his head, "You know I can't do that, Nat."

"Why not?" Natasha reached for Steve's hand, pulling him down to sit next to her on the sofa. "Hasn't this gone on long enough, Steve? Don't you think, after everything we've been through, that it's time to put this shit behind you?"

"If he wanted me there, he'd have asked me himself."

Natasha's lips pressed into a thin line, "Are we talking about the same Tony Stark here? He's more stubborn than you."

Steve ducked his head, trying to suppress a grin. She was right, of course, but the last thing he wanted to do was show up uninvited and ruin everyone's Christmas. Their reunion was long past due, but it would have to wait. Just as he opened his mouth to argue, the buzzer on the front gate sounded, alerting them that Rocket and Carol had arrived.

"Saved by the bell," Steve called over his shoulder, as he hurried out of the room.

"This conversation isn't over, Rogers," Natasha yelled after him.

Christmas Eve

To Steve's relief, Natasha didn't bring it up again. Though as she was heading out the door to the party, she changed her mind, insisting on staying at the compound with him instead.

"No one should be alone on Christmas, Steve," she said, openly irritated at how unreasonable he was being.

"Nat, it's fine," he said, placing his hands on her shoulders and spinning her toward the door. "It's just another day."

Truth be told, Steve used to love Christmas. Even after coming out of the ice, when he had no one, he reveled in the beauty of New York City lit up with thousands of twinkle lights during the holidays.

He thought back to the only Christmas he'd really celebrated in the last seven years. About a year into their time on the run, Steve, Natasha and Sam made the trip to Wakanda to visit Bucky. When they arrived, T'Challa and Shuri had arranged a Christmas celebration just for them. It was the first time in as long as Steve could remember that they let all the bad stuff fade to the background and allowed themselves to be normal for just a little while.

This year, though, being alone sounded better to Steve than anything else. So, when Natasha eventually relented and left for Tony and Pepper's, he decided on a low-key evening, spent with a pizza and a few movies Sam recommended that he'd never gotten to. On the list: Die Hard, Malcom X and Saving Private Ryan.

He was halfway through the second movie when his phone buzzed with a text from Natasha.

"Rhodey's drunk and about to sing 'All I Want for Christmas is You.' It's a crime you're not here to experience it."

Steve immediately Googled the song and let out a hearty laugh when the popular Christmas tune played through his phone.

"Please tell me you've got video evidence."

"C'mon, Rogers. Do you even have to ask?"

A second later, his phone buzzed again, this time with a video. Rhodey was sitting atop Pepper's grand piano serenading a mortified-looking Happy to the Mariah Carey hit. In the corner, Tony and Pepper were dancing. Pepper's head was tipped back in laughter, and Tony had a spark in his eyes that only she could put there.

The familiar sound of Natasha's laughter came through the phone as she flipped the camera so that it faced her. She was holding Morgan on her hip, bouncing the small child to the beat of the song. She smiled broadly into the phone and waved.

"Say hi to Uncle Steve," she said to Morgan, planting a kiss on the baby's cheek.

Morgan giggled and buried her face in the crook of Natasha's neck then looked back at the camera, waved and said, *"Seeve."*

The video cut off, and Steve's heart swelled in his chest. At a genuine loss for words, all he could text back was, *"Thank you."*

She responded with a wink face emoji and a Christmas tree.

He watched the video a second and third time, briefly considered driving up to Tony's even though it was nearing 11 p.m., but ultimately decided to just go to bed instead. The empty compound was even quieter than usual, which made it difficult for Steve to fall asleep. He laid awake until he heard Natasha's soft footsteps on the stairs. She padded down the hallway toward her room, and Steve wondered if she'd slide into his bed the way she did most nights.

His bedroom door was cracked, though the room and hallway were dark, and he could feel her presence as she stopped outside his room. She didn't come in, though, and a second later Steve heard the click of her own bedroom door as it shut behind her.

Natasha stopped just outside Steve's bedroom door and rested her forehead against the doorframe, trying to decide whether to go in. She could tell by his breathing that he was awake. Maybe that's why she didn't go inside. Any other night she would have; hell, most

nights she did, but sleeping in his bed after leaving him alone on Christmas Eve felt wrong, somehow.

Instead, Natasha went to her own room and closed the door. She flipped on the light, and her eyes were immediately drawn to the bed where a square box was wrapped in gold paper. She sat down and set the box in her lap, slowly pulling the paper away.

When Natasha lifted the lid, her breath caught in her throat. Inside was a new pair of pointe shoes. She'd mentioned to Steve, in passing, months ago that she wanted to start dancing again and needed a new pair of shoes. He'd remembered. Of course, he remembered.

She ran her fingers over the soft pink satin, holding back tears that threatened to spill from her eyes. Removing her boots and discarding them on the floor next to her bed, she slid the ballet shoes onto her feet, lacing the ribbon around her ankles. They were perfect.

Immediately, Natasha knew what she had to do. She looked at her phone and saw that it was just after 1 a.m., plenty of time before Steve was up for his morning run. She carefully removed the shoes and placed them back into the box before heading downstairs to get to work.

Christmas Day

When Steve's alarm went off at 6 a.m., he pulled on a pair of joggers, a tee shirt, hoodie and running shoes and headed down to the kitchen for a cup of coffee. When he reached the bottom of the stairs, he was shocked to find Natasha passed out on the sofa in her clothes from the night before.

He looked around the living room and realized every inch of it was covered in decorations and garland and glowing with twinkle lights strung from the ceiling. In the corner was a Christmas tree that stood at least eight feet tall, lit up with white lights and decorated top to bottom in gold, silver, red and green ornaments.

He sat down on the edge of the couch, overwhelmed with gratitude and adoration for the woman asleep in front of him. Steve rested a hand on her forearm, and his touch caused Natasha to stir. She blinked her eyes open, rubbing the sleep from them, and smiled when she saw Steve there.

"Merry Christmas," Natasha said through a yawn.

"Merry Christmas, Romanoff," Steve said with a wide smile. "What is all this?"

"No idea," she shrugged and sat up, "I guess Santa's elves let themselves in while we were sleeping."

"Right, Santa's elves," he said, nudging his shoulder into hers.

"It's a thank you," Natasha said, leaning into him and resting her head on his shoulder. Her voice barely above a whisper. "For the ballet shoes."

“I know how much you’ve missed dancing,” Steve looked down at her, and she turned her face up toward him. He couldn’t decipher the look in her eyes, so he closed the space between them, dropping a kiss to her forehead. His lips lingered there a moment longer than they should have, and when he sat back, her cheeks were flush, and she was smiling.

“I love them,” she said, resting a hand on his knee.

“And I love this,” Steve said, gesturing around the room. “Thank you, Nat.”

“Well, it was the best I could do last minute,” Natasha said, the beaming smile from a moment ago falling from her lips. She still felt so guilty for going to Tony’s without him. “I shouldn’t have left you here alone last night.”

“Hey, look at me,” he peered down at her until she looked him in the eye. “This is perfect. So, please, stop feeling guilty.”

She sighed, unable to stop herself from smiling again at how happy Steve looked sitting in front of her looking around the room at the Christmas decorations. “Fine,” Natasha said, conceding. “But only after you let me make us pancakes.”

Steve raised an eyebrow, “Will they be edible?”

Natasha gave his shoulder a playful shove, “I said that I don’t like cooking, not that I can’t.”

The pair spent the rest of the day watching holiday movies. Steve chose *It’s a Wonderful Life* and, to Natasha’s delight, *Elf*. She chose *Home Alone* and *Christmas Vacation*.

“I can’t believe you’ve seen *Elf* but not *Home Alone*,” she said, popping a piece of sugar cookie into her mouth.

“It’s not like I’ve had a ton of time to sit around and watch Netflix, Natasha,” Steve said. He poked his foot into her thigh from the opposite end of the couch, signaling for her to give him room to stretch his long legs. “How does someone so small take up so much space?”

Natasha smirked and slid down further onto the sofa, flexing her socked feet into his side. He narrowed his eyes playfully, grabbed her by the ankle and pulled so hard that she tumbled off the couch, landing on a pile of pillows with a soft grunt. Satisfied with himself, Steve reached over her to grab the remote off the table and was caught completely off guard when she hooked her arm around his. With a quick jerk, he was flat on his back on the floor next to her.

“Ugh...” Steve groaned, rolling onto his side to face Natasha. “I can’t believe you’d do that to an old man.”

She sat up and leaned back on her hands, a victorious grin on her face, “You can’t play the ‘old man’ card again for a least a month, Rogers.”

He chuckled, pushed himself into a seated position and glanced at Natasha. She tipped her head back and closed her eyes as the late morning sun reflected off the snow outside, casting a warm glow onto her face. Up until very recently, Steve could count on his hands the

number of times he'd seen her completely at ease. Those moments seemed to be coming more and more frequently lately, and he was grateful for it.

"I have an idea," he said suddenly.

Natasha opened her eyes to see Steve retreating from the room, only to return a minute later with a mass of pillows under each arm and a blanket slung over each shoulder. She watched as he assembled what looked like a pillow pit on the floor in front of the sofa.

"Now we both have room to stretch out," Steve said with a broad smile. He sat down, patting the space next to him, and draped a blanket across them as Natasha settled into his side.

Steve's warmth radiated through Natasha. She leaned up to kiss his cheek before hitting play on the movie. As the opening credits of *Home Alone* began, he turned his face into her hair, and she could feel him smile as he whispered, "Best. Christmas. Ever."

The One Where Natasha Dances Again

Chapter Notes

I know, I know - my unintentional hiatus lasted far longer than I wanted it to, but sometimes life gets in the way, and the last thing I wanted to do was throw a chapter together just for the sake of posting. So, here we are, three months later, with something new that I hope you'll love.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

May 2020

The Avengers Compound, Upstate New York

It's been so long since Natasha last danced that she worries she might've forgotten how. The thought is fleeting though. For Natasha, dancing is like firing a weapon - it comes as naturally as breathing. She lifts the lid on the box containing her pointe shoes, the ones Steve gave her for Christmas, and is immediately filled with the same warmth she felt the very first time she opened the box. They're immaculate, and the rosy-colored satin is smooth and cool under Natasha's fingertips as she slides each shoe into place and laces the ribbons around her ankles.

It's the first time she's worn them since early last Christmas morning when she found the gift wrapped on her bed. Since then, the shoes have been tucked away safely in the corner of her closet awaiting the moment she decided she was ready for them. And Steve never pushes, never mentions the fact that months have passed and she has yet to put them on again. Natasha tells herself it's because she simply hasn't had the time, when really, she just can't bring herself to find joy in much of anything when so many have lost so much. When she and her friends have lost so much. When they failed.

But then, during a conversation the previous evening, something shifted.

Steve had just started splitting his time between the compound and an apartment he'd rented in Brooklyn, and at first, Natasha mourns the loss of having him there with her every day. Steve is the one who holds her at night when she can't sleep through the terrors that haunt her dreams, the one who has done so nearly every night for four years. He's the only other person who truly understands her, who understands the responsibility she feels to everyone Thanos left behind.

He's been staying at the compound with her for a couple of days, running leads on Clint, when she notices something about him seems different. Steve seems almost... happy. Natasha, never one to mince words, blurts out the first logical reason that pops into her head, "Who's the girl?"

Steve looks up at her over his sketch pad and raises a questioning eyebrow, "Who's who?"

"Come on, Steve," she says, leaning back in her chair and trying to keep her expression passive. She doesn't actually want to know if Steve is seeing someone; she'd much rather live in blissful ignorance assuming he, like herself, has been basically celibate for the last couple of years. "You've been extra chipper lately. There's got to be a girl."

He laughs the kind of laugh Natasha hasn't heard from him in ages, and the sound reverberates into her soul, "There's no girl, Nat."

It takes every ounce of Natasha's willpower not to shout, "Thank, God!" Instead she kicks her legs up in front of her onto the conference table and crosses them at the ankles. "Well, it's something."

Steve closes the sketchbook and tosses it onto the table. The corner of his mouth quirks up when he realizes that Natasha is fishing. He contemplates messing with her a little but thinks better of it - there's a hint of something, jealousy maybe, in her eyes that he's never seen before. "I've been running a survivor support group in the city."

"Oh!" Natasha says. Her face flushes with embarrassment at the assumption that Steve has been spending his free time with a woman. Of course it's a support group; His whole life has been about doing things in service of others, that wouldn't change now. "I had no idea!"

Steve gives her a shy grin and ducks his head down, "Yeah, I don't know. It just kind of happened. I'd been feeling so lost, so lacking in purpose. I remembered Sam's veterans support group and just kind of ran with the idea."

Natasha's heart swells with pride, and she reaches across the table to squeeze his hand in hers, "Steve, that's amazing."

"Thanks, Nat," he says, and she doesn't miss the way he doesn't let go of her hand as they keep talking. "I honestly think it's helped me as much as it's helping the people who come every week. I feel, I don't know, lighter, maybe? More at peace with everything. It's helped me realize that we have to keep moving forward, even if it hurts."

She feels his fingers tighten around hers when he says, "*even if it hurts*" and swallows down the lump in her throat. His words feel loaded in a way that Natasha isn't ready to acknowledge, so she doesn't. "I'm proud of you, Steve."

"Thanks," a smile spreads across his face. "I'm proud of you, too."

"Me?" Natasha scoffs, rolling her eyes, as if the notion is ridiculous. "What have I done lately to be proud of?"

"Look around you, Nat," Steve says, gesturing to the multitude of screens surrounding them. "You've been keeping this going, you've been keeping us going, for two years."

She shrugs and picks at her cuticles to avoid Steve's heavy gaze. Most days Natasha welcomes the way his ocean blue eyes bear down on her, reading bits and pieces that she's

left just far enough below the surface that no one but Steve will find them. Today, though, it feels like too much. "I think I keep going because I'm afraid of what will happen if I stop."

Steve considers her words for a moment, "All right, then tell me what makes you happy."

"I... I don't really know. It's been a really long time since anyone's asked me that."

"I know there's something, you just have to figure out what it is," he says, gathering his sketchpad and pencil and standing. He rounds the table and drops a kiss to the crown of Natasha's head. "Once you find it, embrace it. Allow yourself to feel something other than guilt and sadness, Nat, otherwise, it'll eat you alive."

Natasha reaches down one final time to ensure the ribbons are fastened securely around her ankles, hits play on the music and grips the ballet barre with one hand, slowly rising up until she's balanced on the tips of her shoes. She lifts one leg into the air, lets go of the barre, and muscle memory from years of practice takes over. From there, Natasha's moves gracefully and with renewed purpose across the hardwood floor, keeping pace with the tempo of the song. Years of trauma and pain and loss that's made its home at the forefront of her mind, fades to the background until only the music and the steady rhythm of her heartbeat are left.

When the song ends, she lowers her feet to the floor and with it comes the release of every emotion she's held onto for as long as she can remember. Natasha leans forward to grip the barre and sinks to the floor but is immediately lifted back to her feet, and she realizes someone's arms are around her. She takes a deep breath to try and steady herself, inhaling cedarwood and citrus - the unmistakable scent of Steve Rogers.

His grip loosens enough for Natasha to look at him. His face, barely two inches from her, is etched with concern.

"What... what are you doing here?" she asks, confused about his sudden presence.

"I left my jacket last night, and when I got here I heard the music, so I came to see what you were doing," Steve brings pushes the hair back from her face, letting his hand come to rest just under her jaw. "I didn't expect to find you dancing, let alone crumbling to the floor." Natasha opens her mouth to reply but another wave of sobs hits her, and she sags against Steve's solid chest. His arms wind around her, holding her steady against him, "Hey, it's ok. I've got you."

They stay like that for several minutes, and Natasha realizes how much she's missed this kind of proximity to him. She focuses on the way his hands move up and down her back, how the familiarity of his cologne immediately puts her at ease, and most of all his voice - the soft, soothing cadence of his voice as he tells her that he's not going anywhere and whatever it is, they'll get through it together. She lets him hold her longer than is actually necessary, aware that once he lets go, she doesn't know when it'll happen again.

"What just happened?" he asks, pulling back enough to see Natasha's face but not loosening his hold on her.

She sucks in a deep breath, wipes the remnants of her tears from her cheeks and tries not to think about how red and puffy her face probably is from crying. Steve is looking at her with such so much compassion that Natasha can barely meet his eye. "I don't know, I guess I didn't realize how much I needed that."

"The dancing or the crying?" he asks with a half-smirked attempt at a joke.

Natasha smiles in spite of herself, "Both."

Steve takes a half-step back, and Natasha instantly wants to close the space between them. She's certain he's read her mind when he leans forward and touches his forehead to hers. Both their eyes fall shut, and Natasha can feel his minty breath ghost across her face, drying the last remaining evidence of her breakdown.

"It was beautiful," he says, sliding his hands from her shoulders down to her hands, where they rest against his chest. They're so close now that all Natasha would need to do is tilt her head up just a little, and their lips would touch. Steve's hands squeeze around hers, and she wonders if he's thinking the same thing.

"What was beautiful?" she breathes, opening her eyes and looking up at him through long, thick lashes. His eyes are open now too, and Natasha's legs nearly buckle at the intensity of his gaze.

"You were," he says, pausing for a moment to take her in. "When you were dancing. How did it make you feel?"

Natasha can feel her heart racing, beating so heavily in her chest that she wonders if Steve can feel it against his own. How did it make her feel? How is she supposed to answer that questions when she can barely form coherent thoughts? Her body is buzzing with electricity, and the only thing she feels is Steve.

"I, uh..." she blows out a shaky breath and tries to shift her focus to way she felt as the music carried her across the floor just a few minutes prior. "I feel... wonderful, actually." As she says the words, she's surprised to realize that she does. The weighted feeling that sat heavy on her chest has begun to disappear, and she feels freer than she has in a lifetime.

Steve flashes her a wide, knowing smile before pulling her into a tight hug, "You found it, Nat. You found something that makes all of this a little easier to bear."

Natasha wraps her arms around Steve and buries her face in his shoulder. Maybe he's right, maybe dancing really can be her release, her escape from all the pain, but she suspects her real tether to this world has been and always will be the man in her arms.

Chapter End Notes

Leave me love down below! I live and breathe for your comments. xoxo.

The One With the Rescue Op

Chapter Notes

Hey, remember that time I said I wouldn't wait so long to update again? Whoops... Sorry about that! :) But I do have a plan for the final two chapters that will bring this series to a close, so stay tuned!

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

August 2021

Avengers Compound, Upstate New York

“I thought this was just recon. Do you really need...” Steve glanced over Natasha’s shoulder at the weapons on her bed and rubbed at his temples, “... three guns and four knives?”

She removed the magazines from two of the guns and checked the slides for stray chamber rounds, then tucked them into her go-bag. The third, she slid into her thigh holster and sheathed the knives in various places on her person, tossing a wry smile in Steve’s direction.

“You never can be too careful.”

He crossed his arms over his chest and pressed his lips into a thin line, “Nat, what aren’t you telling me?”

For a few seconds, she ignored the question and continued stuffing gear into her bag.

“Natasha...” Steve’s voice issued a gentle warning.

“Fine. Rhodey has intel on Clint’s next hit,” She sighed, knowing he wouldn’t let it drop. “I’m going to intercept him.”

Steve blinked a few times, trying to process the information, “Alone?”

Eye roll. “Yes, alone.”

“Do you really think that’s a good idea?”

Natasha zipped the bag and slung it over her shoulder, then turned around, not realizing Steve had been standing so close. His hands gripped her shoulders, guiding her back a step just before her nose rammed into his chest. She looked up at him and was mildly irritated to see the tell-tale worry crease between his brow.

Another eye roll. “It’s Clint.”

The crease on his forehead deepened, “Yeah, Clint, who’s dropped dozens of bodies over the last three years.”

“This from the guy who spent two years tracking down his HYDRA-controlled, super soldier best friend,” Natasha said. It was below the belt, and she knew it, but she wanted to drive her point home.

Steve’s face twisted into a pained grimace, and it was enough to make her feel like an asshole. “I’m sorry. That was out of line,” she said a little more softly. “But, c’mon, Clint would never hurt me.”

“I know that. But the people he’s tangling with aren’t exactly of the ‘talk things out’ sort.” He rubbed at his temples again, clearly frustrated with her current level of stubbornness.

She resisted the urge to laugh, and thought, *“Where the hell does he think I got it from?”*

“All right, then come with me,” she said instead, stepping past him toward the door. “I’m leaving in an hour. Go pack a bag”

Steve considered his options, neither of which he particularly cared for. Option 1: Let Natasha go it alone and probably get into some kind of trouble along the way. Option 2: Go with her, and because none of their missions ever went according to plan, probably still get into some kind of trouble along the way.

He fixed the back of her head with a hard stare, then sighed deeply. Option 2 it was.

“You’re a pain in my ass, Romanoff.”

She smirked over her shoulder, “So I’ve been told.”

Natasha flipped the Quinjet’s controls and punched in the coordinates to a long-abandoned safe house in Bogota, Columbia. She glanced over at Steve in the co-pilot’s seat, a ghost of a scowl set on his face.

“Oh, c’mon,” she said, nudging his arm with her elbow. “It’ll be fun.”

He looked at her sidelong and scoffed, “I think your definition of fun and mine are a little different.”

Natasha chuckled; He had her there.

Regardless, she was glad Steve allowed himself to be roped into this particular mission. It was the first time in two years, they had anything close to the upper hand on Clint’s whereabouts, and Natasha didn’t plan to waste it. She needed all the help she could get, and there was no one she trusted more than Steve for this op or any other.

After the snap, and his initial call to Steve, it took Natasha several days to reach Clint. When he finally called her back, she barely recognized his voice on the other end of the phone. To

say he sounded devastated would've been putting it mildly. Clint was broken. In an instant, and without warning, he'd lost his entire family.

"I just need some time, Nat, please," he'd said, his voice breaking on the word 'please'. "A week. Just give me a week."

"Ok," she'd agreed, begrudgingly. "A week. But you call me if you need anything. I mean it."

"Yeah. Ok."

Before she could say anything else, he hung up the phone. Natasha's heart clenched in her chest at the sound of the dial tone in her ear.

A week turned into two, then three. After about two months and an infinite number of voicemails and texts from Natasha and the rest of the team, Clint turned his phone off. At the six-month mark, he disabled his trackers, prompting Natasha and Steve to take a trip to the farm. When they found it completely deserted, they knew for certain...

Barton was off the grid.

Natasha told herself that he just needed more time. He needed to grieve and process. That when he did, he would come back. She told herself those things every day for months, until Rhodey caught wind of a sword-wielding vigilante slaughtering hoards of criminals, gang members and organized crime rings all over the world. She refused, at first, to believe it was Clint, but in her gut, she knew the truth.

Which is how she found herself on the Quinjet just then, with Steve to her right, headed to Columbia where she hoped they could intercept him, talk him down before he put his sword through anyone else and maybe, just maybe, convince him to come home.

The old SHIELD safe house they planned to hole up in for the next two days was even more worse for the wear than Natasha had expected. She could tell by how unusually quiet Steve had been over the last several hours that he was just as unenthused about their situation.

"Look, it's the best I could do. We're not exactly flush with cash these days," Natasha said, dropping her bag onto a worn, dusty armchair. "It's not like we haven't been stuck in worse."

Steve, who was sitting on the edge of the very small, very dingy looking bed, still wearing that scowl, just grunted in response.

Natasha sat down next to him and bumped her shoulder into his, "Hey, what's going on?"

He met her eye for a moment then looked back down at his hands, "I'm fine, Nat."

If Natasha knew one thing about Steve Rogers, it was that, "I'm fine" always meant the exact opposite. She rested a hand over one of his and gave it a light squeeze, "Something's been bothering you since we left the compound. Just talk to me."

He tipped his head back toward the ceiling and closed his eyes, puffing out a short breath, “This whole thing... It’s... I keep thinking about Bucky.”

Shit...

They were searching for Natasha's missing and very deadly, very traumatized best friend — of course he was thinking about Bucky. Now she felt like an even bigger asshole for the comment she'd made that morning.

“Shit,” she breathed. “I didn’t even consider...”

“No, hey, it’s not your fault,” Steve said, finally turning to face her. “I want to find Clint. I want to help you bring him home... Just, when you said you were going after him, it took me right back to those years where all I did was try to find Bucky.”

He was quiet for what felt like a long while, and Natasha wasn’t really sure what to say. She’d been there. She knew how much it’d hurt Steve to find out Bucky was alive, how hard he fought to find him after DC, how much he sacrificed to keep him safe after the Accords.

“I miss him,” he let out a quiet sigh and wiped away a few errant tears.

Natasha wrapped her arms around Steve’s broad shoulders and tugged until she felt his body sag into her and his arms instinctively wind around her waist, “I know. I know you do.”

Steve didn’t cry, but Natasha could tell by the string of shaky exhales against her neck that he desperately wanted to. His ability to be so vulnerable, to wear his heart on his sleeve, was something Natasha both admired and envied about him. It’s the reason why she found him so easy to trust, despite being trained from childhood to trust no one.

She stayed quiet and rubbed slow circles on his back, knowing he needed a moment to feel and sort through the pain. After a couple of minutes, Steve’s grip on Natasha loosened. He sat up and swiped a palm down his face.

“Thanks.”

“Don’t mention it,” Natasha pinned him with a soft smile, and nudged his knee with hers. “You good?”

Steve returned the smile with an appreciative one of his own, “Yeah. Yeah, I’m good.”

“Good,” she grabbed her bag from the nearby chair and pulled out a tablet, placing it between them on the bed. She tapped at the screen, and a 3-D map and blueprints appeared in the air.

Thank God for Tony’s tech.

“Rhodey’s intel has Clint hitting the drug ring’s production facility at sunrise, which means we need to be in position before then,” she pinched a section on the screen and zoomed in. “The building has two entry points from the ground floor, but I think he’ll enter from this small hatch on the roof.”

Steve chuckled, and Natasha raised her eyes to meet his, caught off guard by the amused expression on his face.

“What?” she asked, her brows furrowing.

“Just thinking about Barton crawling around in the vents at Stark Tower back in the day,” his tone had a touch of nostalgia to it, and Natasha couldn’t help but smile.

“He’d hide up there for hours sometimes, just waiting for someone to scare the shit out of,” she said, laughing. “I think Tony hated it the most.”

“Tony definitely hated it the most. Do you remember when he put those little micro cameras up there and caught Clint singing show tunes?” Steve said, and Natasha burst into a fit of laughter.

“Yes!” she said, between giggles. “And he used it to blackmail him into cleaning the bathrooms for a month...”

Tears were now streaming down both of their faces. Steve tipped his head back and pressed a hand to his chest. Natasha was doubled over, her forehead resting on Steve’s knee. She let out a wistful sigh and sat up, wiping the wetness from her eyes. Steve righted himself, too, and looked at her fondly.

“Now what? Do I have something on my face?” Natasha asked, still wearing a massive grin.

“You do,” Steve paused for a moment when a slightly confused expression crossed her face. “A smile.”

That earned Steve an eye roll. “So clever,” she said, winking. “Man, I needed that.”

“I think we both did,” he admitted. “Thank you.”

Natasha’s hand found Steve’s and squeezed, “You already thanked me, Rogers.”

“Well, I’m thanking you again, Romanoff,” he said, his voice quiet and a little listless. “Honestly, I don’t think there’s any amount of thanks that could properly express how grateful I am for you. For this.”

Natasha hadn’t been expecting an admission like that. They’d had each other’s backs for years now. They’d found a comfortable, almost peaceful, way to exist together in the field and out of it. What Steve meant to her and what she meant to him had gone unspoken for so long that she wasn’t sure either of them really knew how to verbalize it. Hell, most of the time Natasha wasn’t even sure it was something that should be said outright, for risk of destroying the bond they’d built.

But hearing Steve say that now made Natasha’s heart race the way it did every time she thought maybe he meant for her to read between the lines. She swallowed hard and shot him an affectionate smile, “That’s what we do for each other, Steve. It always has been.”

Steve awoke rested and in a slightly better mood than he'd been in the previous two days, made better by the fact that when he opened his eyes, he was still curled around Natasha's back the way he'd been when they settled into bed the previous night. He studied her, watching the slow rise and fall of her shoulders as she breathed, and realized happily that they'd both slept through the night.

He glanced at the clock on the wall. 3:34 a.m. They had a little less than three hours before dawn and, despite plotting out Clint's most likely routes to his entry point and what they would need to do to avoid being seen by him or anyone else, Natasha insisted they needed to be in position by 5 a.m.

Wanting to give her just a few extra minutes of peace before whatever was about to happen, Steve carefully untangled himself from Natasha and padded quietly into the small bathroom to shower and gear up. He emerged 10 minutes later to her sitting cross-legged on the bed, wearing his tee shirt and a pair of sleep shorts and going over the plans on her tablet. Steve felt his heart about stop at the sight of her.

Natasha glanced up and gave him a half smile, "Morning."

"Hey. How'd you sleep?" he asked, snapping the collar of his suit closed.

"Surprisingly well," she slid off the bed and started digging around in her bag until she found her suit. "Give me 10, and I'll be ready to head out."

Steve nodded, poured himself a mug of lukewarm, shitty coffee and picked up the tablet to review their plans one final time. As far as plans went, it was a solid one, and as long as they didn't run into any major snags, they had a real shot at pulling it off. The hardest part would be convincing Clint to actually come back to New York with them.

Natasha stepped out of the bathroom donning her widow suit. She laced up her boots, slid her guns into their holsters and secured the batons onto her back. Steve felt his chest swell with a sort of pride seeing her dressed for a mission for the first time in a long while.

"You ready?" she asked, raising a questioning brow at him.

Down one shield and in need of some sort of weapon other than his fists, Steve pulled a gun from her bag and slid it into place on his belt, then nodded, "Let's do it."

Natasha landed the Quinjet in stealth mode in an abandoned parking lot near the drug facility, and after surveying the block to ensure no one had seen them, the pair climbed to the roof. Steve checked the time on his phone — just after 5 a.m.

They posted up on the far side where they'd be able to see someone entering or exiting the roof but wouldn't be seen unless someone knew to look for them. Natasha assembled her rifle, screwed the scope on, and scanned the area.

"All clear, so far," she said, as Steve settled in at her side.

For the next hour and a half they took turns watching the perimeter for cartel members and any sign of Clint, and to Natasha's chagrin, not a single person appeared. Then, just as the sun broke over the horizon, her phone pinged with a text from an unknown number.

It read: *"Stop looking for me."*

She immediately typed out a response, *"Where are you? Please let us bring you home,"* but when she hit send the message immediately came back as undelivered.

"Fuck," she ground out, resisting the urge to smash the phone to pieces.

Steve cocked an eyebrow at her, "What?"

She held out the message for him to see, "He knew we were coming."

"Shit," his eyes widened, and he looked like the wind had been knocked out of him.

Natasha bit down on her tongue to keep at bay the scream building in her throat. They were, after all, still camped out on a building that housed an international cocaine operation. "Un-fucking-believable. The first time in two goddamn years we're actually close, and the bastard is still a step ahead of us."

Steve pulled Natasha into a seated position with their backs against the wall of the rooftop and gathered her hands in his. "Hey, look at me," he ducked his head slightly, forcing her to meet his eyes. "We'll find him, ok? I told you I'd help you bring him home, and I meant it."

She leaned her head back against the cold brick and squeezed her eyes shut, willing away the tears that burned at the back of her eyelids. Was she that naive to think Clint hadn't been keeping tabs on them the way she was (failing spectacularly at) keeping tabs on him? He didn't want to be found, he'd made that much clear long ago, so it should have been no surprise that he'd be paying attention to where they were and what they were doing.

When Natasha didn't respond, Steve pulled her to her feet. He rested his hands on the sides of her shoulders, a steadying gesture that she was immediately grateful for.

"Nat, you good?"

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm good," she ground out. "Just pissed."

"I get it. It was the same when we were looking for Bucky," he said softly, even though he knew it probably wasn't much of a comfort. "Let's clean up and get the hell out of here, yeah?"

Feeling defeated, Natasha just nodded.

Back on the Quinjet, Steve strapped himself into the pilot's seat and punched in coordinates for the compound before Natasha had a chance to argue that she should fly them home. Once they reached altitude, he put the jet into autopilot and joined her in the cabin where she was scribbling notes and trying to figure out where the op had gone bad.

“You’re gonna drive yourself nuts trying to figure it out, Nat,” he said, sitting down next to her and gently tugging the notebook from her hands.

Natasha sighed and let her head drop back against the wall of the plane, “I’m already a little nuts, Rogers, don’t ya think?”

Steve chuckled, “Glad to see your sense of humor’s back.”

She lolled her head to the side, and looked at him. That earnest expression he so often wore was replaced with something akin to compassion and... *was that adoration?* Natasha wondered, not for the first time, how Steve had managed to survive so long with a heart so pure, so kind, so easily open to others. So easily open to her.

“It’s my turn to thank you,” she said, the beginnings of a genuine smile curve across her face.

Steve couldn’t help but to smile back, not when she looked at him that way, “What for?”

“For taking this on with me,” Natasha said, of their failed op. “For the last nine years. For not leaving me behind.”

He swallowed down the lump that’d formed in the back of his throat and blinked away tears. “What was it you said to me yesterday? That’s what we do for each other?”

“Mmhmm,” Natasha’s smile grew, as she wrapped her arms around his neck and tugged him into a hug. “Always has been, Rogers.”

Steve tightened his hold on her, "Don't you forget it."

Chapter End Notes

There's just no way that the first contact Nat had with Clint in five years was when she went to get him from Tokyo. She definitely looked for him, probably dragged Steve along, too!

So very many thanks to everyone who's stuck around and/or has just recently found me. I'm grateful as hell!

The One With the Sick Super Soldier

Chapter Notes

Chapter 10, better late than never, right? This is 100% complete and utter fluff.

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

October, 2022

Brooklyn, New York

“Pizza’s here!” Natasha called out, letting herself into Steve’s apartment. “And, yes, before you ask, I got extra banana peppers.”

She bumped the door shut with her hip then locked it behind her. The last thing she expected to see when she turned to set the box on the kitchen table was Steve passed out on the couch, burritoed in a blanket, with the hood of his sweatshirt pulled up over his head.

“Steve?” She toed off her shoes and approached the couch, expecting him to wake up before she got anywhere near him (*enhanced senses and all*), but he didn’t move.

She knelt down next to the sofa, and swallowed down a chuckle when she noticed his mouth was hanging open. When she got a good look at him, though, her smile faded. His complexion was pale, his cheeks were tinged bright pink and his breathing was rough and raspy. Natasha pressed the back of her hand to his cheek, then to his forehead. He was burning up.

Finally Steve stirred, blinking a few times as his eyes adjusted to the light in the room. His gaze landed on Natasha and he groaned.

“Hey there,” she said, pushing the hair back off his forehead with a soft smile.

“Hey,” he croaked out, wincing as he swallowed.

“What, uh... what’s going on here?” Natasha asked, motioning to the way he’d swaddled himself into the blanket.

With some effort and several exaggerated grunts and groans, Steve managed to push himself into a seated position. He pulled the hood down off his head, and the face he made when he ran a hand through his sweaty blonde hair almost made Natasha laugh out loud. Almost.

“Got cold,” was all he said.

She pressed her lips together and tugged at the blanket, “Give me your hands.”

“Huh? Why?” Steve's brows pulled together in that way that always let Natasha know when he was about to be stubborn.

“Just... give me your hand, please,” she reached into the blanket and gently tugged his arm free. “Oh, my god, Steve. You're ice cold.”

“I'm fine,” he mumbled, slipping his arm back into the blanket cocoon and slumping down into the sofa.

“You're not fine,” Natasha said, feeling his forehead again. “I think you have a fever.” She went into the kitchen and began rummaging through his cabinets and drawers, then headed to the bathroom to do the same.

Steve heaved a sigh, “What are you doing?”

“Looking for a thermometer,” she called back. “And I didn't even realize you *could* get sick.”

“I'm not sick, Natasha,” he said, more forcefully than he should have, which sent him into a coughing fit that sounded like something crackling inside his chest.

Natasha winced at the sound and reappeared in the living room a moment later with the thermometer in her hand and a concerned look on her face, “Open.”

Begrudgingly, Steve did as he was told. When it beeped, Natasha pulled it from his mouth and frowned. “Not sick my ass,” she muttered, more to herself than to Steve, then padded into the kitchen and began filling his tea kettle with water.

“Are you at least going to tell me what it says?” he asked, hoarsely.

“A balmy 104, Steve,” she said, pausing at the stove to look at him over her shoulder. That elicited a bit of a chuckle from him, which immediately turned into another coughing fit. Natasha tried and failed to remember the last time he'd looked quite this miserable.

She filled two mugs with hot water and dropped a peppermint tea bag into each then settled in next to him on the sofa. He accepted the mug, not even giving it a second to cool before taking a sip. He swallowed, and Natasha watched a flicker of relief wash over him. She hadn't realized she was still staring until he looked at her and said, “What? Do I have something on my face?”

The corner of her mouth tugged up, and she rolled her eyes, “What are your symptoms, aside from the non-fever?”

Steve attempted to stretch his arms over his head and winced, “Body aches, chills, the cough, which you've also had the pleasure of experiencing. And a bit of a headache.”

“I figured as much,” she said. “I need to go get you some medicine, something to help break this fever.”

“You really don't have to. I'll be fine, Natasha,” Steve took another long sip of the tea, and dropped his head back onto the couch cushions. “And the last thing I want is for you to stick

around here and end up sick, too.”

“So, you admit that you’re sick?”

His only response was a sidelong look that made Natasha grin. She covered his still-freezing cold hand with her own, “You’re not fine, so as much as I appreciate you not wanting to give me your germs, please don’t bother arguing.”

Steve knew he was fighting a losing battle; he barely had enough strength to keep his eyes open, let alone go toe-to-toe with Natasha. She was as stubborn as he was when she wanted to be. “Yes, ma’am,” he said, and the corner of his mouth turned up in a slight smile.

“Good. Can you stand? I want to get you into bed before I leave,” she said, setting her mug on the coffee table.

He raised an eyebrow and smirked at her in response.

“Oh shut up,” she said with an exasperated laugh, swatting his arm lightly before she hooked it over her shoulder and pulled him to his feet. It wasn’t the first time Natasha had needed to haul the six-foot, 240-pound super soldier somewhere, but she usually had Clint or Sam or even Wanda propping him up from the other side. He did his best not to lean all his weight on her, but it only took them a few steps to realize how weak he actually was. After several minutes and a brief pause so Steve could hack his lungs up, Natasha managed to get him into bed.

She’d seen Steve take harder hits than this in the field and get right back up like it was nothing, so, It was a little disconcerting to see him laid out this way from something as benign, in comparison, as the flu. She pulled the sheet up to his chin and draped a thick blanket over top. “Are you warm enough?” she asked brushing his hair back out of his face.

“Mhm,” he hummed as his eyes fluttered closed.

Natasha scanned his space — tissues, tea and water on the nightstand, cell phone plugged in and on the bed next to him. Satisfied that he’d be all right until she got back, she leaned down and pressed a kiss to his forehead. His mouth curved into a sleepy smile, and Natasha’s heart squeezed in her chest.

“I won’t be long, promise.”

Steve cracked his eyes open slightly and shooed her toward the door, “Go.”

As much as Natasha preferred living on the compound in the middle of the woods, she was never more grateful that Steve lived within walking distance to a pharmacy. She returned 25 minutes later with an entire store’s worth of medicine, cough drops, soup and a Snicker’s bar (that was for herself, of course).

She crept quietly to his bedroom, and warmth filled her chest at the sight of him. He was curled on his side with his hands clutched at the top of the blanket's plush fabric and resting

just under his chin. His lips were parted slightly, and he looked more peaceful than Natasha had seen him in years. She sat down on the edge of the bed and rested a hand on his arm in an attempt to wake him without startling him. When he didn't move, she reached over and ran her palm lightly over his back. After a few seconds his eyes fluttered open, and a hand poked out from the blanket and latched onto hers.

"You came back," he mumbled sleepily.

"Course I did," Natasha gave Steve's hand a gentle squeeze and dumped the contents of the plastic bag onto the bed next to them. "And I come bearing gifts."

He pushed himself into a semi-seated position on the bed and raised an eyebrow at the pile, "You think (*cough*) maybe you went a little overboard (*another cough*) with the meds (*cough, sneeze, cough*)?"

"This one's for the body aches and fever," she said, opening the first pack and dropping three extra strength Tylenol into Steve's hand. "And that one's for the cough," she said, handing him two green gel caps.

He tipped his hand back, dutifully depositing all five pills into his mouth, and washed them down with a gulp of water. "What about those?" he asked, pointing to two unopened boxes and some sort of liquid.

"I've never had to nurse a super soldier back to health before, so I got a few backups, just in case these don't work," Natasha shrugged, gathering up the pile and taking them to his attached bathroom. "I'm gonna go clean up the living room and kitchen. You should try to get some more rest, ok?"

"Stay with me," Steve slid back down under the covers and pulled back the blanket on the other side of the bed. "Please."

He sounded just pitiful enough that Natasha couldn't say no. She slid in next to him, propping herself against the headboard. Steve shifted his pillow into her lap and turned on the TV, flipping to Netflix and scrolling until he found Lucifer.

"You hate this show," she said, quirking an eyebrow at him when he tipped his face up to look at her.

"But you like it," he said with a soft smile, "I'm about to pass the hell out, anyway."

Natasha grinned down at him, "Whatever you say, Rogers."

He relaxed back into his pillow, and she pushed a hand into his hair, running her fingers lightly through the strands. He relaxed under her touch, and when her fingers pressed into his aching scalp, he let out a heavy sigh of relief. He was quiet after that, but Natasha kept one hand in his hair as she flipped through the episodes until she found the one she wanted to watch. She thought the cold medicine had finally dragged him under when he reached for the hand holding the remote and pressed a kiss to it.

“Thank you, Nat,” Steve whispered against her palm, and butterflies exploded in her chest.

Steve blinked his eyes open, allowing them to adjust to the dimly lit bedroom. He had no idea what time it was or how long he'd been asleep, but he vaguely remembered Natasha waking him at one point and making him take more medicine. He pushed himself into a seated position, and the first thing he noticed was that Natasha wasn't there, followed immediately by the sound of her banging around in the kitchen. The tension in his chest unravelled, and he looked around the room — The TV was off, and so were the lights. The blinds were still drawn, but the sun peeked through, warming his face.

He slid out of bed feeling surprisingly good for having been basically incapacitated the day before, and headed to the bathroom to shower and brush his teeth. When he emerged 20 minutes later, Natasha was sitting on his bed with a cup of coffee in each hand.

“Well, look at you, back among the living,” she teased, handing him one of the mugs. “How're you feeling?”

“Pretty good, actually,” Steve sat down next to her and took a sip, “How long was I out?”

“Uh, about 14 hours,” Natasha said, peering at him over the edge of her mug.

“Jesus,” he said, setting the coffee on his nightstand and sliding his watch onto his wrist. He looked down at it and saw that it was quarter after 10 in the morning, “Shit. Shit, I was supposed to lead a survivors group this morning.”

“I took care of it.”

He narrowed his eyes slightly and raised a questioning brow, “What do you mean you took care of it?”

“I mean, I took care of it,” she said with a shrug, taking another long sip of coffee. “I ran the meeting.”

Steve's mouth fell open, and he stared at her. It wasn't the first time Natasha had left him at a loss for words, and he was certain it wouldn't be the last, but that wasn't at all what he expected to hear.

Natasha rolled her eyes, “No need to be so dramatic, Steve.”

“No, I mean...” he ran a hand through his damp hair and shook his head. “Nevermind. Just... Thank you.” Steve smiled that smile, the one they both knew always made Natasha's cheeks flush a little.

“Yeah,” she said and, ignoring the heat rising in her cheeks, managed a smile of her own. “Yeah, of course.”

Steve plucked the nearly empty mug from Natasha's grip and deposited it on the nightstand next to his then grabbed her hand and tugged her forward, wrapping his arms around her waist. On instinct, Natasha's wound around his neck, and she felt his face drop to the dip

between her neck and shoulder. They stayed that way, holding one another, neither of them in a hurry to stop.

After a few minutes, Steve pressed a kiss into her hair, and whispered, “Thank you for taking care of me.”

Natasha dropped her arms from around his neck, letting them rest on his arms that still were wound around her, and tilted her face up to meet his gaze. His earnest blue eyes pinned her in place, and her mouth went dry. “You already thanked me, Steve,” she whispered back.

“It’s worth saying again,” he grinned down at her and dropped a kiss to her forehead this time. “You hungry? I think I remember seeing a pizza on my kitchen table at some point last night. Or was that a flu-induced hallucination?”

“The pizza’s real,” Natasha laughed and leaned back into Steve, resting her head against his chest. “But let’s stay here for just another minute.” She breathed in his familiar scent — sandalwood, leather and a hint of vanilla — and closed her eyes, memorizing the ever-steady rhythm of his heartbeat.

Chapter End Notes

Originally I’d planned to write this chapter as Steve taking care of Natasha, but I felt like doing it this way afforded a lot more room for some humor mixed in with the sweet moments.

Leave me some love if you enjoyed! And thank you, as always! xoxo.

The One Before the Time Heist

Chapter Notes

This scene in Endgame had so much potential to show just how close Steve and Natasha had become (I know they were just friends in canon, but something more in that moment, a hug preferably lol, would have made it so much better.) Instead the writers kind of made it seem like Steve was dismissing her feelings with the, "I think we both need to get a life" line. (Though, I like to think that what he really meant was, "We should get a life, together.")

Anyway, I took some liberties with the dialogue and fixed it. :)

See the end of the chapter for more [notes](#)

October 2023

Avengers Compound, Upstate, New York

"You know, I'd offer to cook you dinner, but you seem pretty miserable already."

Natasha started a little at the sound of Steve's voice and drew in a shaky, shallow breath. It's not like he'd never seen her cry before; hell, he was one of the very few people to ever see her cry at all, let alone the sheer number of times he had over the last seven years. But she thought she'd been alone just then, so seeing him standing there threw her off kilter a bit.

She glanced over to where he was leaning against a shelf and gave him a sad, watery smile. "You here to do your laundry?" she asked, trying as hard as she could to keep her voice even.

He looked her over, feeling like an ass for interrupting what was obviously a private moment, "And to see you."

A sentiment like that from Steve would have instantly lifted Natasha's spirits on any other day, but it'd been the kind of day that knocks you down until it's hard to get back up. She dropped her head to the back of her chair and exhaled, "Clearly I'm fine."

"Clearly," Steve deadpanned, knowing full well that she was anything but.

She gave him a half-hearted smile, and his chest tightened, wanting nothing more than to turn it into the full-blown, irresistible grin he so loved to see on her. "You know, I saw a pod of whales coming over the bridge."

Natasha raised an eyebrow at the sudden topic change but decided to run with it. Anything to take the focus off her current state. "In the Hudson?"

“There’s fewer ships, cleaner water...” he trailed off, hoping to see any hint of a real smile on her face.

“If you’re about to tell me to look on the bright side,” she said flatly, crossing her arms over her chest. “I’m about to hit ya in the head with a peanut butter sandwich.”

As far as threats went, it wasn’t her best.

Steve ducked his head then tossed his coat and keys on the table and sat down across from her. “Sorry, force of habit,” he said, heeding her threat, empty as it was. He leaned back in the chair and sighed, then looked up at Natasha with the kind of intensity that always made her heart beat a little faster. Only now, there was a sort of sad acceptance in his eyes.

“You know, I keep telling everybody they should move on, grow. Some do,” he paused, and his gaze softened. “But not us.”

It was nothing she hadn’t heard a thousand times over the last five years.

“Natasha, They’re gone. We gotta find a way to live with that,” Tony had said when she’d stopped over one evening shortly after Morgan was born.

“You can’t save everyone, Nat,” Rhodey told her a couple of months ago after they’d failed once again to track Clint’s whereabouts.

“You take care of everyone else, but who takes care of you, Romanoff?” Carol had asked, not for the first time, just earlier that day.

And, logically, yeah, she knew what they were saying was true. But this life was all she’d ever known, so anyone who expected her to just move on without a fight didn’t really know her at all.

Natasha blinked back fresh tears that bit at the corners of her eyes, unable to meet Steve’s, for fear of seeing her own pain reflected back in them, “If I move on, who does this?”

“Maybe we should do something for ourselves for once. Maybe we should stop being afraid of what we mean to each other. Maybe we should put all this behind us and start over, together,” is what he desperately wanted to say, but the words caught in his throat.

Instead he just said, “Maybe it doesn’t need to be done.”

And even as the words crossed Steve’s lips, he knew he didn’t really mean them. He just hated how much pressure Natasha put on herself to keep any semblance of the team together. He got it, he did, but she wasn’t really living. And if he was being completely honest with himself, neither was he.

She scoffed and shook her head, “You don’t really believe that, do you?”

He ran a hand through his hair and shrugged, “Honestly, Nat? I don’t even know anymore.”

“You know what my life was like... You know who I was before. I used to have nothing, and then I got this — This job, this family, and I was better because of it,” she paused, unable to stop the corner of her mouth turning up ever-so slightly. “And even though they’re gone,” she continued, her voice breaking, “I’m still trying to be better.”

Steve ached knowing he couldn’t do anything to take away the pain she was in. He leaned forward and reached across the table, tugging Natasha’s hand into his. “Hey, look at me,” he implored. She glanced up to see a soft smile on his lips, the kind that provided immediate comfort, and the knot in her stomach loosened just a little. “You don’t have to prove anything to anybody. Natasha, you’re already the best person I know.”

“C’mon, Steve,” she looked at him dubiously. “You’ve never been one to blow smoke up my ass, so don’t go starting now.”

That earned a chuckle, “Eventually you’ll believe me when I say it.”

“Don’t hold your breath, Rogers,” she said, her mouth ticking up at the corners.

Steve studied her face for a moment, and it suddenly occurred to him that maybe this wasn’t just about Thanos or the blip or adjusting to their new lives over the last five years. “Nat, what’s really going on?”

The smile dropped from Natasha’s face and she glanced down at their fingers still linked together on the table, “I’m not sure what you mean.”

He cocked his head and gave her a knowing look.

She tugged her bottom lip between her teeth and wiped another errant tear from her cheek, “Rhodey found more bodies.”

Steve’s stomach bottomed out, “Clint.”

“Yeah,” she leaned forward, resting her elbows on the table, and put her face in her hands. “I need to find him, Steve, before something happens.”

“You mean before something happens to him?”

Natasha looked up at him with red-rimmed eyes, “He can’t keep going like this forever. Either someone catches him, or someone ki...” her voice trailed off, unable to finish the thought. “I have to get to him first.”

Steve stood and walked around the table to where Natasha was sitting. He tugged her to her feet and folded her into his arms. Without hesitation, she relaxed against his solid chest, and slid her hands around to his back.

“I promise you, we’ll find him,” he whispered, pressing a long kiss into her hair.

“Thank you,” she murmured into his chest and gripped his sweater between her fingers.

He brought his hands up along the sides of her face and tilted her head up toward him, “For what?”

“For not saying that everything will be fine when we both know it won’t be,” her voice broke, and Steve wordlessly tucked her back into his arms. He held her there in the middle of the briefing room, cording his fingers through her hair until he felt her take a deep breath and shift back just a little. “Are you hungry?”

Steven grinned down at her, “Starving. What’re you in the mood for?”

Natasha bit down on her bottom lip again, catching the way Steve’s nostrils flared in response. She smiled affectionately and said, “How about some breakfast?”

“Well, Romanoff, it’s lucky for you I make a damn good omelet.”

Twenty minutes later, Steve was scooping the finished omelets and homestyle potatoes onto their plates. He grabbed their food and followed Natasha back into the briefing room, setting them down on the table, then headed back to the kitchen. “Drink?” he called over his shoulder.

“Uh, yeah, there should be a couple beers in there somewhere,” she said, popping a couple potatoes into her mouth, followed by a fork full of omelet. It’d been a while, several weeks probably, since she’d eaten anything other than peanut butter sandwiches, cereal or pizza. Between running leads on Clint, keeping tabs on what was left of the team and putting on a brave face for Steve (*even though she knew she didn’t have to*), Natasha was running on empty. “Damn, if I’d known you could cook like this, I would’ve never let you move back to Brooklyn.”

Steve laughed and set a beer in front of her before sitting back down at the table. He took a pull on his own drink and smirked at her, “Eat your dinner, Natasha.”

She shot him a cheeky grin in return and shoved another bite into her mouth. And for a little while, there was no work, no next mission, no pain or bad memories or grief. For a little while they let themselves forget; they let themselves laugh and smile and breathe.

For a little while it was just them.

Of course, those moments had always been fleeting, and just as they were finishing up their second beers, a notification popped up on the security monitor. And their world tilted on its axis. Again.

“Hi, uh, is anyone home? This is, uh, Scott Lang. We met a few years ago at the airport in Germany.”

Steve glanced over his shoulder at the screen then back to Natasha, whose face had completely drained of color.

“I was the guy who got really big. I had a mask on... you wouldn’t recognize me. Ant Man! I know you know that,” Scott continued.

He watched Natasha shift her attention away from the screen to his face and then back, and his mouth dropped open as he got to his feet. “Is this an old message?” he asked, though he already knew the answer, as unbelievable as it was.

She stood too, gripping the edge of the table to keep her legs from buckling. Her voice nearly caught in her throat when she said, “It’s the front gate.”

Steve whipped around to Natasha, and their wide-eyed expressions were a mirror image of one another. For a moment it was as if they were cemented to the floor, neither of them moved, and then all at once, they were bolting down the stairs to the front of the compound.

Natasha yanked the door open, barely able to register that Scott was actually the man standing in front of her. A man who was supposed to have dusted. He was on the registry. No one had seen him in five years. This shouldn’t even be possible.

She felt Steve press a steadying hand to the small of her back and tried to focus on the warmth of his palm instead of the wave of anxiety that was bubbling up inside of her.

“Lang?” Steve started. “What the hell’s going on?”

He pushed the door open and stepped aside to let him inside. Scott took two steps across the threshold and looked from Natasha to Steve, who were still standing side by side, dumbfounded.

Hey, guys," He ran a hand through his hair, looking shaken, like he’d been to hell and back. “We really need to talk.”

Chapter End Notes

I started writing Step Into the Light last July, and here we are, a year later, wrapping up its companion piece. It's a little bittersweet, so thank you to everyone who read, commented and left me love. It means the world to me! xoxo.

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!