

The Crackship Armada Sails Again, AKA Soulmate Shorts Part 2

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Storylink: <https://archiveofourown.org/works/4167942/chapters/9408057>

Category: Marvel, Marvel Cinematic Universe, The Avengers (Marvel Movies), Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D. (TV), Agent Carter (TV), X-Men (Movies), Captain America (Movies), Guardians of the Galaxy (Movies), Ant-Man (2015), Thor (Movies), Doctor Strange (2016)

Genre: F/F, F/M, M/M, Multi

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Last updated: 01/20/2019

Words: 114795

Rating: Teen And Up Audiences

Status: In Progress

Content: Chapter 1 to 72 of 72 chapters

Source: ArchiveOfOurOwn.org

Summary: More crackships. SO MANY crackships. *Chapter 1*: Intro/Index

The Poll is now hosted at Kwiksurveys and is still open, if you're new to this Armada, or if you didn't vote yet. I don't promise to write all pairings or to write them all in order, but I do work from the top of the Poll going down, so the more people who vote for a ship the more likely it is to get written!

This chapter will contain the Index for the Shorts as they are written, plus links to any continuations that are posted. Please refer back to the Index of the original Crackship Armada for many, many more ships (some of them a lot less cracky) than those written here!

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***Chapter 2*: True Love's Kiss (Bucky Barnes/Kitty Pryde)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20/ShadowSoldier%20copy_zpsdzuo5gjn.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“This is it,” Scott whispered quite unnecessarily in Kitty’s ear. She rolled her eyes, glad he couldn’t see her in the darkness. “You ready?”

“Of course.” They’d been preparing for the mission for days now, running simulations of every permutation Scott and Logan could come up with in the Danger Room.

“Careful then, darlin’,” Logan’s hand rested lightly on her shoulder for a moment, and then Kitty was sliding forward alone, her tiny stature and light weight a huge advantage as she moved silently over the rough ground, her shadow in the night so small even if a guard should see it, they would assume it was just a small woodland animal, a fox perhaps, or a large cat – Shadowcat was on the prowl.

She phased in through the wall just to one side of the massive doors, came out behind the desk of the door guard exactly as predicted. He never had a chance to make a sound before she jabbed the hypodermic needle in her hand into his neck, her other hand going over his mouth at the same time.

The guard only twitched briefly before slumping unconscious. Kitty checked the corridor beyond the inner door was clear before bending over the desk and starting to hack the security system, looping cameras, switching off motion sensors. Within two minutes she was done and straightening up, hurrying to the outer door, disarming the security system and swinging it open.

Jean had maintained a light touch on her mind throughout the operation, and the whole team was already running towards her, knowing that she could only leave the cameras on loop for so long before someone might notice. As soon as they were all inside Logan and Scott secured the door again as Jubilee took over the computers.

“Good job, Kitty,” Jean whispered softly.

They all had copies of the plans of the facility, one of HYDRA’s most secret experimental facilities. It was surprising that the Avengers hadn’t discovered it yet, but they were pretty busy clearing up the mess in Sokovia right now, and it wasn’t as if the X-Men couldn’t handle anything they might find here.

At Jean’s mental signal, they all split up, each heading for their assigned targets. Kitty took Logan’s hand in hers, glanced up at him. He smiled tightly – he didn’t like phasing, but it was the quickest way to get where they had to go, which was the base’s control room.

They dropped through the floor, and Kitty was glad Logan was there as he made the drop from the ceiling much easier on her when he caught her before she hit the floor. And then he let go and stepped forward, claws emerging with a *snickt*.

Kitty looked away from the bloody scene he painted, crossing quickly to the computers. A flash drive from her pocket inserted into the mainframe, a few commands on the keyboard, and she smiled in satisfaction. The base’s doors would only open for *their* codes now.

“Okay, I’m heading for the holding cells,” she told Logan quietly, “you hold this area. Weapons storage room is next door. The codes are changed but don’t let them break in.”

“Go teach your grandmother to suck eggs, Shadowcat,” the Wolverine growled, but he was smiling after his own grim fashion as he said it, and Kitty grinned cheekily back at him before dropping through the floor again, this time to the base’s lower level. They had no idea

who was being held here, but HYDRA had an unfortunate habit of ordering all prisoners executed as soon as they realised they were under attack. Kitty had no intention of letting that happen.

She rolled as she fell to the floor, absorbing the impact on her whole body. There were no alarms blaring just yet, so nobody had noticed their incursion. Springing to her feet with lithe grace, she crossed the room to the single guard gaping at her incredulously in a sprint, and disabled him with a leaping roundhouse kick to the head.

Another memory stick and a few typed commands, and she had the cell block locked down. No one would be getting in or out unless they had one of Kitty's specially made access cards. Now she was at leisure to check the place over.

"Who the fuck are you?" an astonished voice said, and she whipped around, yanking out her gun and squeezing off a shot – but the guard had already slapped his hand down on the Emergency button on the wall.

And there went the sirens, the one thing her hacking was unable to disable as it was on a separate circuit. Kitty grimaced at the noise, but her shot had been good, despite her hasty aim. She checked the monitors, but there were no more guards in the cell block. And, from what she could see, only one prisoner, a man dressed all in black, looking up at the camera in his cell as the alarms went off...

Kitty stared as a metal fist suddenly crashed into the camera, and then the screen went black.

"That's the Winter Soldier," she whispered disbelievingly. "Jean," she said it aloud, knowing the telepath would pick her up, "the Winter Soldier is here."

Do not engage! Jean replied instantly, I'm on my way down to you!

"He's not fighting, he's a prisoner." Jean didn't reply, though, and Kitty, glancing at the number above the now-dark monitor, realised the door to the Soldier's cell was right opposite the guard station. She bit her lip, looking at it silently, wondering what to do.

I could just check on him. Tell him we're friendlies, that we're going to get him out of here... mind made up, she headed over to the cell. The port in the door was stiff, and she struggled with the latch for a moment before realising that it was above her head height anyway. With a shrug, she phased through the thick metal door.

Bucky had been waiting for the door to open, for his chance to ambush the guards who would undoubtedly be coming in to kill him if the facility was really under attack. He couldn't think of any other reason for the cell block alarms to be going off, since he was the only prisoner and it certainly wasn't him making any escape attempts.

He really hadn't been expecting a child to walk *through* the door.

"Whoa!" Kitty dodged away from the Soldier's upraised metal fist. "I'm not here to hurt you!"

Bucky's lips curled back in a snarl and he struck out without being aware of what he was doing. The words which had appeared on his skin twenty-one years ago had so offended HYDRA's high command that they had ordered him conditioned to kill instantly anyone who spoke them to him. And it appeared some of his conditioning was still in effect, he realised almost with despair, despite HYDRA having been unable to brainwash him again. The machine – the Chair – had been destroyed by Bucky himself, along with everyone who knew how to operate it, before they caught him again.

His memory had been repairing itself slowly. He knew who he was, what he'd been –

what he'd done. HYDRA wanted their Asset back, of course, and von Strucker had ordered him confined here while he sought to recreate the Chair. There'd been talk of using some other asset, a witch who could manipulate minds, but apparently they didn't trust her not to manipulate him to serve her own ends.

"Eek!" There was no way Kitty could have deflected that blow, not without breaking her arm with the block – so she phased *through* it and dodged away. Another blow was coming at her almost immediately, and she phased again. And again, but she wasn't leaving the room. It almost seemed as if the Soldier was fighting against the instinct to hurt her, his lips drawn back in a grimace.

She wasn't a child, Bucky realised. Not much past, barely out of her teens if that, but her body, though small, bore definite feminine curves beneath her tight-fitting black tac suit. And apparently she could walk through walls, which was a new one on him. He wished like hell she'd just get out of here, this girl who might be his soulmate, instead of ducking and weaving around him in a graceful dance, letting his blows pass right through her when she couldn't avoid them.

"You have to get out of here, before I hurt you," he gritted out desperately, unable to control his own body.

Kitty's eyes widened with shock, and he caught her a glancing blow on the shoulder as she faltered. Even a glancing blow was enough to knock her from her feet, though, and she skidded across the floor and hit the wall – and rolled right through it.

And stepped back through in a different spot a moment later.

"I'm not leaving you. You're my soulmate."

"I can't – stop myself – trying to kill you!" He struck out again, and she slipped through the blow and stepped in close, wrapping her arms around his waist, her head tipped back to look at him. He noted distantly how tiny she was, a scant five feet tall even in the thick-soled combat boots she was wearing.

"Will true love's kiss break the spell?" Kitty asked hopefully.

"I'm afraid not," he seemed to be fighting it, but she could sense his arm – and it was made of freaking *metal*, the whole thing, *wow* – swinging back towards her, so she phased right through him.

"Shame. Jean, I could really use some help here!"

I can't get in to you. Can't find the cell keys, came Jean's reply, and Kitty realised the telepath was just outside.

"Then we'll just have to come out to you!" She danced around the soldier, leading him in a circle until she had him right where she wanted him, and then phased through him again. He spun around with phenomenal speed, lunged forward – and she caught his arm and stepped backwards, phasing with him and letting his momentum take them right *through* the wall.

Bucky stumbled, pulled completely off balance, and crashed to the ground with his tiny soulmate beneath him, pinning her to the floor. She struggled, her lips open in an O of surprise, and his hand closed on her throat – just as Jean's fingers landed on his temple.

"That's a nasty business, isn't it?" a soft voice said in his ear, and he felt a light touch on his mind. It felt wonderful, *cleansing*, and he closed his eyes and moaned with relief. "There, there," the soft voice soothed. "Let go of our little Cat, now."

His fingers unclenched with a clicking and whirring of gears. "I didn't want to hurt her," Bucky said, his eyes still closed.

"I know." Jean looked past him at Kitty, who was staring up at her wide-eyed. She could

read in both of their minds their newly discovered soulmateship. “You’ll never hurt her, will you, Bucky?”

“Never again,” he promised fervently. “As long as there’s no more traps in my mind...”

“No more,” Jean promised, lifting her hand away from his head. “You’re all safe now.”

He opened his eyes, looked down into the soft hazel eyes of the young woman lying beneath him. They were beautiful eyes, shifting colours of amber and green. He could have stared into them forever.

Except he was crushing her with his weight and she was struggling to breathe. With a muffled curse Bucky sprang to his feet, stooping to help her up. Jean backed away with a quiet smile, going over to the security station to check the monitors, giving them at least the illusion of privacy.

“I’m sorry,” Bucky said inadequately.

“It’s all right. It wasn’t your fault. Bucky, is that your name? I’m Kitty, Kitty and Bucky sounds kind of funny, doesn’t it?” Kitty suspected she was babbling, but, well, up close her soulmate was absolutely *gorgeous*. He was wearing plain black sweatpants and a black tee, neither of which did anything to disguise the fact that he was built like a tank. Shaggy dark brown hair tumbled around stubbled cheeks, piercing ice-blue eyes seemed to stare right into her.

“Kitty,” he said slowly, tasting the name on his tongue. A smile curved his face, flashing a dimple in his chin, and Kitty stared. “It suits you. Little cat.” His human hand came up, made to stroke her hair, but at the last moment he thought it might be a bit presumptuous and let it fall away.

Kitty grabbed his hand and lifted it back to her head. “You can pet me. I don’t mind.”

Her brown hair was so soft under his hand. He stroked gently, wonderingly, and she pushed her head into his touch and made a contented little sound.

“This feels a lot like a dream,” Bucky said wonderingly.

“I promise it’s not.” Kitty gave him a mischievous smile. “I could give you a kiss so you know it’s real.”

“No, then I’d *definitely* know it’s a dream,” he shook his head, a small grin coming to his lips. “What’s this thing you have about kissing me? That’s the second time you’ve offered.” He adored her smile, the hint of wickedness in it as she looked up over the foot of height difference between them.

“Maybe the third time I’ll just *take*, then,” Kitty reached up, put her hands on his shoulders. “Though you’ll have to bend down for me.”

He couldn’t help but laugh. And put his metal arm around her tiny waist, lifting her up easily. “This is better. You won’t get a crick in your neck.”

“I like the way you think, soulmate.” Her arms slid around his neck and she kissed him, her lips soft and tender and everything sweet in the world that he’d been denied for over seventy years. Slender legs wrapped around his waist and Kitty hung on tight as he kissed her back with fierce hunger.

When finally they pulled apart, both panting for breath, they were surrounded by silently watching X-Men. Bucky stiffened, automatically assessing for threats, but Kitty’s soft little hands on his cheeks stilled him.

“They’re my friends. It’s all right, Bucky, no-one here will hurt you.”

“Unless you break Kitty’s heart,” Logan growled, “and then we’ll hurt you *a lot*.”

***Chapter 3*: A Good Word With The Goddess (Deadpool/Sif)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/DeadSword_zpsbc4amsks.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Oooh, hello again! I love these.”

Shut up, Wade. You’re not supposed to be talking to me.

“But they’re so much *fun*! The idea of having a soulmate is fantastic. Especially for me. Nobody understands me, you see, the thought of someone who would, who’d get me, it’s just so *enticing*...”

Do you want to find out who I’ve paired you with or not?

“Yes, please!”

Then shut the fuck up and let’s start the story.

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“Princess Anna-Marie,” Wade drawled, sliding onto the bar stool beside Rogue. “Sounds like so much fun.”

“Fuck off, Wade,” Rogue said without heat. Leaning into him for a moment, letting their shoulders brush. Wade was one of very few people who’d willingly allowed her to touch him, before Loki. He didn’t mind the pain, and he could heal from it anyway. When her desperation to feel human touch had become too much, she’d gone to him more than once, and he’d given her what she needed, even stripped off his shirt and let her touch his scarred torso, held her in his arms and pressed his lips to her brow as she cried on his shoulder. It was a debt she’d never be able to repay, and they both knew it.

Not that he would ever ask for payment anyway. It wasn’t Wade’s way. He was unbelievably generous to those few he considered his friends. Rogue had heard through the grapevine about how he’d gone to Gambit once word reached the Cajun of Loki and Rogue, let Gambit beat him half to death to take out his pain and rage.

Another debt she’d always owe Wade. Rogue cast him a sideways smile. “So what boon would you ask of a Princess, Deadpool?”

He was watching the dance floor. “Put in a good word for me with the goddess?”

“Huh?” Puzzled, Rogue followed his glance. Saw Sif there, dancing gamely but rather awkwardly as Kitty and Illyana tried to show her the steps. “Oh dear God no. *Sif*? She’d have you for breakfast.”

Wade licked his lips. “I certainly hope so.”

“Wade!”

“Oh please tell me you’re not innocent of sex still. Am I really going to have to give you the birds and the bees talk? Because I’d really hoped Loki had taken care of that by now...”

“No!” she blushed red. “I mean, yes, he has – we have – Wade, stop it!” as he began to laugh.

“Ah, lass,” he reached out and ruffled the white streak in her hair fondly. “Still so innocent, and getting married tomorrow.”

“Shut it,” she grouched, pushing his hand off, “or I won’t introduce you to Sif.”

“Introduce who to Sif?” the lady herself said, striding up to the bar. “Another, my good

man, I pray you,” she said to Bobby, who was acting as bartender. He grinned and held his hand over a glass, ice cubes forming and tumbling into it before he poured scotch over it and handed it over. Sif smiled and took a gulp. “Ah, most refreshing!” She leaned one elbow on the bar and smiled fondly down at Rogue. “So who have I not met?” She glanced beyond her at Wade, cocked a dark brow as she caught the blond staring at her. “*You* have not been to Asgard.”

“I’m afraid no one in their right mind would trust me to behave in a way befitting a diplomat,” Wade said cheerfully. “I have a tendency to say very inappropriate things to important people, and then take it amiss when they try to kill me.”

Sif smiled. “A kindred spirit. I have no skill at diplomacy either, I fear. My negotiations occur at the point of my blade.”

Wade was gazing, positively love-struck. Feeling a little surplus to requirements, Rogue grinned and eased off the bar stool in between them. “I’m going to dance, Sif. Have a seat, you two can discuss fighting styles. Wade likes swords too.”

“*Katanas*, get it right,” Wade grumped, but he gave her a wink and Rogue winked back and headed off to join her girlfriends.

“The curved blades the samurai of Japan use?” Sif slid gracefully onto the vacated stool. “I fought against them once, long ago. They were most skilled.”

“Wade Wilson, m’lady,” he remembered his manners, what little Jean and Ororo had managed to beat into his crazy head, held out his hand. “Also known as Deadpool, but please call me Wade.”

“You may call me Sif,” she declared with a smile, “as I hope we will spar and you will show me your skill at blades.” Her slender hand curled around his.

Both accustomed to pain, neither cried out at the sharp, stinging agony in their palms.

Sif’s grey eyes widened as she stared at the blond man.

“Fuck me you’re the best author *ever*, she’s hot like the sun!” Wade exclaimed.

*Wade, now would be a really good time to talk to your soulmate and not to me.*

“Oh, yeah, I s’pose – goddamn, I am the luckiest guy in the world,” he said very sincerely to Sif, “and I’m really sorry.”

“What for?” she frowned slightly at him, puzzled.

“You’re so fabulous you undoubtedly deserve better than a fucked-up science experiment like me.”

Sif’s smile was slow, her eyes sparkling as she retorted; “No doubt many Asgardians will tell you that you deserve better than a woman who plays at being a warrior.”

“From what I’ve heard, you don’t treat it like a game,” Wade shook his head, “and I doubt anyone would have the guts to say that in your presence.” He grinned at her. “And if they say it to me *out* of your presence, I’ll remove their guts for you, how’s that for a deal?”

She was still holding his hand. Tightened her grip now. “That sounds like a deal I would like.” Her free hand came up, touched his cheek lightly. “And if anyone else tries to use you for a science experiment, I will cut them into tiny pieces and feed them to *bildsnipe*.”

Her hand was a warrior’s hand, strong, callused from gripping a sword. Wade turned his head and kissed her palm softly, saw a faint blush come to her pale cheeks. “Come dance with me,” he said suddenly, standing up and tugging gently on her hand.

“I am – not very good at this way of dancing,” Sif shook her head, her blush deepening as he tried to pull her towards the dance floor.

“That’s okay. I’ll make a complete idiot of myself and everyone will be so busy laughing

at me, they won't notice!" Wade said gaily, and Sif started to laugh, letting him tow her along.

Just as they got to the dance floor, though, the music changed and a slow song began to play. Wade glanced up at the DJ's box, gave Jubilee a discreet thumbs-up. She grinned back at him.

"This kind of dancing is easy," He pulled Sif into his arms, sliding his hands to the back of her waist. She went stiff against him instantly.

"In *public*?"

"Look around you," Wade suggested, and Sif did, her eyes widening as she saw couples swaying together on the dance floor.

"This is – acceptable? To be so close, in public?" Sif seemed rather shocked. Asgardians, with their long lives, were rather more reserved than humans, apparently.

"Certainly." Wade mentally revised his plan of getting Sif into bed on the first date. Well, he had time. The rest of his life. She relaxed slowly against him, putting her arms around him and leaning in, resting her cheek on his shoulder.

"People are looking at us," Sif whispered in Wade's ear.

He grinned. "They're thinkin' I'm the luckiest guy in the world." He was, indeed, receiving a lot of incredulous stares. Being Wade, of course, he was totally used to that.

Sif laughed, let him hold her a little closer. And when he turned his head and sought her mouth, she kissed him back. Wade broke the kiss to look up at the ceiling briefly.

"You're fuckin' *awesome*."

*Thank you, Wade. Now get back to kissing your soulmate.*

## **\*Chapter 4\*: Double Trouble (Steve/Jane Foster)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/AstroCaptain\\_zpsl7cicc5m.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/AstroCaptain_zpsl7cicc5m.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

"She did what?" Steve fell about laughing as Thor finished the story.

"She hit me with her vehicular conveyance," Thor repeated, grinning. "Twice. And then my other friend Lady Darcy smote me down with her weapon of lightning."

"They both sound like trouble," Bucky said with a small smile, "but hey, they did a decent job of making sure you wouldn't be a threat to them."

"That is true, but Lady Jane in particular is most heedless of threats to her safety. Hitting me with her vehicular conveyance was an accident, both times. I am glad she has Lady Darcy to see to her safety. As for the Aether, well," Thor shook his head, "Lady Jane confessed that she was simply drawn to it out of *curiosity*."

Steve was laughing even harder. "Oh, she sounds like a hoot, Thor. I gotta meet this dame."

Bucky rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Of course you want to meet her. This is the woman trying to punch wormholes through space. You prob'ly wanna volunteer to jump through to see what's on the other side."

"That would be a noble and courageous act," Thor nodded.

"For fuck's sake, don't *encourage* him!"

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Jane Foster turned out to be a petite, almost frail-looking, but very beautiful woman with long brown hair and soft brown eyes. She had a merry laugh, which sounded out as Thor picked her up and swung her around.

“You’re crushing my ribs, big guy!”

“My apologies, Lady Jane,” he set her down gently, patted her shoulder affectionately – which almost sent her to her knees, Bucky noticed – and turned his attentions to the slightly taller and sturdier brunette who’d followed her in. “Lady Darcy!” Darcy got the exact same hug treatment, but returned it with much more enthusiasm.

“Dr Foster,” Tony stepped forward, smiling. “Delighted to meet you.”

“Mr Stark, likewise,” Jane returned his handshake with a smile. “I’ve been after Thor to introduce us for ages. I want to talk to you about using an arc reactor to power the...”

“Let’s leave the sciencing until after the introductions,” Pepper cut in gently, reaching to shake Jane’s hand too.

“Oh,” Jane had the good grace to flush. “Sorry, Ms. Potts...”

“Please call me Pepper,” she said charmingly, “and let me say how glad we are to have you and Darcy come to the Tower. Natasha, Maria and I have been feeling very much outnumbered.”

Jane smiled at that, looking around. Natasha and Maria weren’t even there, busy elsewhere at that time, and the room did seem to be full of large males. Including Dr Bruce Banner, and she barely managed to politely disengage from Pepper before darting over and grabbing his hand to shake enthusiastically.

“Typical scientist,” Bucky muttered to Steve as Jane once again lost herself in science-speak, not in the least discouraged by Bruce, who joined in enthusiastically.

“Stunning, though,” Steve said appreciatively.

She was, Bucky couldn’t disagree, willowy and slender. Her friend Darcy was rather more to his taste though, with curves for days and a mouth made for sin. Thor had called her Jane’s intern, but Bucky thought *wrangler* was probably more the correct term, as Darcy gently cut off Jane’s conversation with Bruce and turned her towards Clint. Jane promptly started talking about wind speed and trajectory at him, which made Clint’s eyes glaze over and Bucky grin. He had no idea how the archer pulled off his shots without doing the appropriate calculations, but Clint’s math was pretty much grade school level.

Realising she’d lost Clint and he was utterly blanking at her, Jane sighed and disengaged politely, turning towards the two tall men standing together. The blond was Captain America, of course, wearing a plaid shirt and jeans almost identical to Jane’s current attire. She’d resisted Darcy’s every effort to get her to wear something nice, insisting that they were *moving* and she’d be carrying boxes and fixing her machines shortly, and she needed to be comfortable for that.

The sharply-dressed dark-haired man stepped forward to greet her first, and Jane realised this must be the Winter Soldier, Bucky Barnes. She smiled and took his offered hand, her eyes drawn inevitably to his left arm.

“That is an *amazing* piece of machinery,” she said, wondering if he’d let her take a look at its workings.

“The only thing HYDRA gave me worth having,” Bucky said dryly, “though Stark’s been busy designing improvements.”

“Really? I’d love to take a look,” Jane said enthusiastically.

Steve snickered a laugh beside them, and she gave him a reproving glance. “Don’t laugh, it’s about quality of life.”

Both Steve and Bucky started back, eyes widening. Steve flushed rosy red and seemed to have swallowed his tongue, so Bucky nudged him sharply. “Go on, punk, you need to say something!”

“Why?” Jane looked blank for a moment, and then suddenly caught on to the possibility. “No,” she said disbelievingly. “You can’t possibly be. *Captain America*?”

“That’s me,” Steve managed finally.

“You idiot, what a dumbass soulmark to have...” Bucky said, but trailed off as he saw Jane’s eyes light up. “Well, I guess she’s used to it,” he mumbled under his breath. Sighed as Jane stepped forward and Steve reached for her hands, gazing down into her eyes. They were still gazing at each other in starry-eyed silence a couple of minutes later, Bucky watching them with his arms folded, having awful premonitions of having to pull *both* of them out of unwinnable fights by the scruff of their necks, when Darcy came up to him.

“Hey tall dark and dangerous, what’s up with my boss lady and Captain Studly?” she said cheerfully.

“*What?*” Bucky wheeled around to face her. It was only after she spoke again that he realised she had an even stupider soulmark than Jane’s. Because she had to be, there was surely no-one else who would say those words to him...

“I said, what’s up with... what?” Darcy actually took a couple of steps back, because the former assassin’s (at least, she hoped he was a *former* assassin) blue eyes were unnervingly intense as he stared at her.

“Does your soulmark say ‘what’?” he asked.

“Yes, why?” Darcy’s brain then caught up. “Oooh, *really?*” She looked Bucky up and down and actually licked her lips. “*Yum*. Lucky me.”

“Lucky *me*,” Bucky disagreed, “though you’re going to have to help me wrangle those two,” he gestured at Steve and Jane without taking his eyes off Darcy. “From what Thor’s been tellin’ me, your boss has the self-preservation instincts of a depressed lemming. And Steve is no better, though at least he’s not a skinny little weakling any more.”

Darcy smiled up at him. “Well. At least it means double dates won’t be awkward!”

***Chapter 5*: The Right Moment (Sam Wilson/Beth The Waitress)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/Sambeth_zpsv9yxq7mn.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“She’s pretty. You should ask her out.”

Steve glanced sideways at Sam, snorted quietly. “Who, Beth? She’s not my type.”

Sam looked again at the blonde waitress who had greeted Steve with cheerful “Hi, Steve!” as they took their seats in the busy sidewalk café. “Are you blind? She’s *stunning*, she’s everybody’s type!”

Steve grinned at that. “I won’t deny the visual appeal, and Beth’s a sweetheart, too. But – I think she’s the picket-fence kinda girl, and – that’s not who I am. Not any more.”

Sam looked at his friend, at his noble chin held high – and he shook his head. “You are out of your tiny mind.”

Steve laughed. “Why don’t you go for it then, Sam? I’ll put in a good word for you.”

Eyeing Beth as she bent over to clear dirty coffee cups from another table, Sam hesitated. “Is she single?”

“As far as I know,” Steve shrugged.

“Well in that case, *hell* yeah. Introduce me when she comes to take our order, would ya?”

Only, it seemed that Beth wasn’t going to take their order. Another waitress came over instead. And delivered their coffee. And brought their check. The café was busy, both waitresses rushing about, and Beth never got close to their table.

“I could go and say you’d like to ask her out?” Steve offered.

“I am not twelve, Rogers,” Sam said witheringly, “I can ask a girl out by my own self, thanks very much.”

Steve grinned. “Now you know how I feel when Nat’s trying to matchmake for me.”

Sam laughed at that. He had a loud, cheerful laugh, and Beth glanced over as she delivered coffee to another table and smiled at him. Before dashing off again to take another order.

“Are you gonna...?” Steve nudged Sam as they got up to leave.

Sam glanced inside the café. Saw Beth leaning on the counter having a moment’s respite. She looked flushed and tired, running the back of her hand over her forehead. He hesitated, but then shook his head. “Not today. It’s only a couple blocks from the Tower, I’ll come another day, when she’s not run off her feet. I get the feeling I might get my head bitten off if I try to hit on her today.”

Steve made a noise – was he *clucking*? Sam aimed a punch which the super-soldier dodged, chuckling.

“Asshole. You gotta pick the right moment, Rogers.”

“You pick your *moment*, then, Falcon. Let me know if it ever comes.”

Sam growled and grabbed. Steve ran, laughing, easily evading his friend.

Over the next week, Sam went back to the café no less than four times.

And the moment never came.

The first time, Beth wasn’t there. He asked and was told it was her day off.

Just my luck, Sam thought, and took his coffee to go.

The second time she was there, but just finishing her shift as he arrived, walking out of the café with her bag over her shoulder, chattering on her phone. She gave Sam a bright smile and walked away. He turned to watch her go regretfully.

Shitty timing, Wilson.

The third time, he was with Stark, who talked so much Sam never even got to say a word to Beth. There was no question of his asking her out with Stark there anyway, the billionaire was the world’s worst gossip. If Beth turned him down Sam’s ego would probably never recover from the razzing he’d get from the other Avengers. He looked regretfully back at her as he and Stark walked away.

Next time, beautiful.

On the fourth occasion, he was just entering the café, about to take a seat at one of the outside tables, when he saw Beth at a neighbouring table, talking to a good-looking white dude dressed in a very expensive suit. Tall, blond and blue-eyed, the guy could have given Steve

Rogers a run for his money in the looks department. Sam hated him instantly.

“That’s very sweet,” Beth said, laughing at something Mr Overly Handsome had said.

“How about your phone number then, sweetheart?” Mr Smarmy Git gave her a winning smile.

“Oh no. I’m sorry.” Beth smiled sweetly. “I don’t date people I meet at work.”

Sam froze, hand on the back of the chair he’d been just about to pull out to seat himself. Making like his phone had just vibrated in his pocket, he pulled it out. “Hi? Oh, yeah, I was just about to get coffee – no, sure, I can come now!” He walked hastily away.

Shit, shit, shit!

Despondent, Sam trudged back to the Tower. How the hell was he ever going to ask Beth out now? He wasn’t going to make like a creepy stalker and follow her around so that he could ‘conveniently’ bump into her at the grocery store or something. She seemed pretty sharp, anyway, he’d heard her remember several customers by name and their coffee order, she might well recognise him from the café and guess what he was up to. At which point he’d be lucky if he didn’t get slapped with a restraining order.

With a glum sigh, Sam leaned back against the wall of the elevator as it zoomed upwards. It let him off on the common floor and he headed over to the fridge, took out a carton of orange juice and poured himself a glass.

“Why the long face?” Barton asked from his perch on top of the fridge as Sam returned the carton.

Sam absolutely did *not* shriek like a girl. “Goddammit Barton!”

The archer leapt agilely down, grinning. “You know, for a guy who flies, you don’t look *up* all that much.”

“Oh fuck off.” Sam picked up his glass and took a long slug of his juice. Turning around he did *not* shriek again as he came face to face with Romanoff.

Natasha grinned at him, her eyes dancing with amusement. “He’s just failed, *again*, to get up the courage to ask the girl he fancies out on a date.”

“How did you... no, scratch that, I don’t want to know the answer,” Sam grumped, “and it wasn’t about *courage*. It’s about picking the right moment.”

“Suuuure,” Clint said.

Sam growled and was about to storm out when Natasha touched his arm lightly. “Don’t mind us, Sam. You coming tonight?”

He frowned. “To what?”

“Stark’s Team Bonding thing,” Clint leaned on the counter, arms folded, showing off his thick biceps. “It’s mandatory – but hey, he’s hosting it in this fancy club, so, could be worse. At least we can get drunk and par-tay.”

“Oh, yeah,” Sam remembered now. “Sure. Yeah. What the hell. Ain’t like I’ve got a date or anything.”

It was a very fancy club indeed, and Sam was glad he’d taken Clint’s words to heart and dressed up nice. He looked doubtfully at the queue outside the club – and then Maria Hill got out of a cab with Banner and saw him.

“Hey, Sam. You don’t have to queue, we’re on the list.”

“Of course,” Sam shook his head with a wry smile, followed them to the front of the line. Stark had booked out the VIP section of the club, which was even swankier than the rest of it. As soon as they walked in waiters pressed glasses full of Cristal on them.

“Nice,” Sam took a sip, looking around. Romanoff was draped over a white leather couch, her red hair looking like blood spilled on its pristine surface in the weird club lighting, Barton perched on the back of the couch behind her as usual. “So what’s the team bonding thing?” Sam asked them, walking over.

“Drink, dance, have a good time,” Natasha replied with a grin. “Stark knows how to do things right.”

“Oh,” Sam blinked. “Well – yeah. That does sound pretty good.” He took another sip of champagne. “Where *is* Stark?”

“Dancing, of course,” Natasha waved across the balcony rail to the dance floor below.

“Of course,” Sam echoed, headed over to the rail and leaned on it to look down. It was a seething mass of humanity down there, he’d never pick anyone out, but he spent a moment looking anyway, until someone tapped him on the shoulder.

Turning around, he nodded and grinned as he saw Steve – and almost dropped his glass as he saw the stunning blonde on Steve’s arm, her slender curves caressed by a stunning crimson dress, high, strappy sandals on her feet.

Steve smirked at him. “Sam Wilson, allow me to introduce Beth Jackson. Beth, may I present Sam as a much better dancing partner than me? Man’s got *rhythm*.”

Beth smiled shyly.

“You ass,” Sam said to Steve, “you totally set this up.”

“Me?” Steve put a hand to his heart and did his best to look innocent, but Sam had known him far too long to buy that.

“Seriously, man, I told you, it’s about picking the right moment...”

“Oh, shut up and come dance with me,” Beth interrupted, laughing as Sam obviously got quite flustered. She’d thought he was really attractive that first time he’d come in with Steve, and then just a couple of days later her co-worker had told her he’d come in and asked for her, and seemed disappointed when she was off duty. She’d seen him a couple of times since, and then yesterday Steve had mentioned that Sam had asked for him to ‘put in a good word’.

Beth had been incredibly flattered. She knew who Sam was, of course – the newest Avenger’s face had been all over the media for a while – and had cursed her rotten luck when some stuffed-shirt twit tried to hit on her just as Sam arrived at the café today. By the time she’d deflected the self-absorbed moron Sam had gone.

Miserable, Beth had texted Steve when she finished work. *I think I fucked up.*

Less than an hour later, Natasha had rocked up on her doorstep with a bag full of expensive makeup and the most beautiful dress and shoes Beth had ever seen. And now here she was, having basically just *demand*ed an Avenger shut up and dance with her – no wonder he was staring at her open-mouthed, she’d behaved outrageously, it must have been that ridiculously expensive champagne...

“Sam, you all right?” Steve said, puzzled.

“Yeah. Yeah, thanks, man, I’m fine.” As though in a dream, Sam reached out to take Beth’s hand. She gave him a shy smile, long lashes sweeping down to hide her cornflower-blue eyes.

Steve slid away, giving them at least the illusion of privacy. Sam couldn’t think of anything to say that didn’t sound stupidly trite, though, so he just kind of stood staring at Beth.

“You don’t have to come dance with me if you don’t want to,” Beth blurted out when he’d been silent for a few seconds too long.

“I can’t think of anything I’d enjoy more,” Sam said with utter sincerity, and his smile grew as Beth’s eyes flew up to meet his again, wide and shocked.

“Did you just – did I just...” Beth sputtered, astonished.

“Yeah. I’d show you, but,” Sam gestured, tapping his right hip just behind the hipbone, “I might get arrested for indecent exposure.”

Beth blushed. If he would, she *certainly* would, because her mark was in a corresponding spot – on her inner left thigh. She’d have to have her legs wrapped around his lean waist...

“Yes, um, no,” she said hurriedly, trying to push the mental image away.

Regaining a little of his composure – though not much, because he could see Steve cracking up in the background and suspected the super-soldier’s hearing had picked up far too much – Sam smiled at Beth.

“We can check out each others’ marks later. Right now, I believe you invited me to dance?”

Beth’s smile was like being bathed in sunlight. “Come on then, Falcon. Steve’s been talkin’ you up, you know. Says you got the moves.”

He tightened his hold on her hand, tucked it into the crook of his arm and led her towards the stairs. “Oh, I’m gonna show you the moves.”

***Chapter 6*: A Lot To Ask (Darcy/Pyro)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/FireShock%20copy_zps59emz1v6.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Can I have Wednesday afternoon off please, Jane?” Darcy asked.

“Sure,” Jane didn’t even look up from the machine she was tinkering with.

“Why?” Tony asked, popping his head around from the other side of the machine. “Got a date, Lewis?”

She made a face at him. “No, Stark. Don’t be nosy.”

“You do remember that you’re obliged to let JARVIS know where you are at all times, right?”

Darcy sighed. “And JARVIS will tell you anyway. All right. I want to go to the Mutant Rights rally.”

“Why? Are you X-gene? Do you have a cool power?”

“No, I’m not X-gene,” she denied, but seeing Tony’s inquisitive stare, sighed and realised she might as well tell him. “My best friend growing up, she was unidentified X-gene. When her power manifested – well, we lived in a small town. There was a lot of anti-mutant prejudice. She and her family all wound up dead.” Darcy swung slowly back and forth on her chair. “It’s why I chose poli-sci. I felt like it was the only chance I might have, to make a difference. To get a voice, to fight for mutant rights.”

Tony stared at her for a moment, looking a little startled. And then he tipped his head to her in a surprising gesture of respect. “Good for you, Lewis. Have a good time at the rally. Be careful, though. Why not take Cap along as a bodyguard? He’s got some pretty strong views on mutant rights too.”

“Yes, and he and Sam took off for parts unknown yesterday on Barnes’ trail,” Darcy

shrugged. “If he gets back in time, I’ll ask him.” Privately, she was hoping that she wouldn’t have to. Because she wasn’t just *attending* the rally.

She’d co-written the speech for one of the principal speakers. And she was scheduled to meet and talk with St. John Allerdycce, a journalist who she knew had written some great, insightful articles about mutant rights. He was on the public record as being X-gene positive, though he’d never revealed what, if any, power he possessed. Darcy was curious but willed herself not to ask.

Steve and Sam didn’t get back in time, so on Wednesday Darcy fed Jane her lunch, reminded her that she had the afternoon off, and promised to be back to give Jane dinner before heading out, cheerfully farewelling JARVIS in the elevator.

The rally was well-attended and peaceful, a few anti-mutant groups turning up with signs that read FREAKS OUT and the like, but they were ignored. Darcy had time to listen to the first three speeches – including the one she’d co-written, which was very well received – before she had to go and meet Allerdycce. They’d never spoken, but they’d communicated by email and agreed to meet at a nearby café.

On arrival, Darcy scanned the room, but didn’t see anyone who looked likely. Shrugging, she pulled out her phone and texted the mobile number Allerdycce had sent her. *You here yet? How do you like your coffee?*

5 mins. Black with a shot of vanilla syrup, please he texted back after a moment, and she grinned and ordered for both of them.

It was a little less than five minutes later when a good-looking blond guy entered the café and looked around. His gaze settled on Darcy and he gave her a rather uncertain smile, so she smiled back.

“Hi, I think you might be waiting for me?” The stunning brunette was the only person in the café on her own, though she had two cups in front of her. John could hardly believe his luck as he headed over and greeted her hopefully.

Big blue eyes widened behind her glasses, and her smile went from expectant to megawatt. “All my life, I think,” she said.

John nearly fell over with shock. “*What?*”

Darcy pushed up the sleeve of her sweater to reveal the words on her forearm, smiling happily up at him. He took her hand and traced his fingers – *wow*, and they were *really* warm, considering that it was a cool day outside and he didn’t even have a coat on – over the scrawling letters.

“*You are* St. John Allerdycce, I’m assuming?” Darcy asked, since he seemed to have lost his voice, just staring down at her arm.

“Yes – please just call me John.” He seemed to snap back to attention and slid into the seat opposite her, blue eyes tracing her face. “Darcy.”

“That’s me.” She wasn’t about to pretend to be shy and bashful, so she stared at him, drinking in his narrow, clever face, his surprisingly broad shoulders, his strong hands.

“You’re beautiful,” he said quietly, and she did blush a bit at that. He had an accent, not American.

“Where are you from?” she asked, a little puzzled.

“Melbourne, Australia. Originally, anyway. My parents moved here when I was thirteen.” He shrugged. “The accent’s never quite gone away. What about you, Darcy Lewis, where do you come from?”

“New Jersey,” Darcy said with a wry grin, “very unexcitingly. It’s not at all like *Jersey Shore*.”

That made him laugh, and she pushed the coffee she’d bought him across to him.

An hour later, he got up and bought the next round of coffees. Two hours after that, they went to dinner together. John was easy to talk to, a wonderful listener – Darcy felt as though she could have talked to him all night. She’d texted JARVIS earlier, telling him that she’d met her soulmate and to please have someone make sure Jane ate dinner, before switching her phone off. Otherwise Stark would probably be raining all over her parade by now.

“So,” she looked across the table a little nervously at him. He’d brought her to a little Italian place he knew of, and they were sitting with their knees bumping under the red-and-white checked plastic tablecloth, a candle in a Chianti bottle between them casting shadows on his face. “I know this is a really rude and personal question...”

“You’re my soulmate,” his smile was still wondering at his good fortune. “You can ask anything you like and I promise I won’t take offense.”

“You’re on the record as being X-gene positive, and having been educated at Xavier’s. What – um – what do you do?”

He smiled. The candle flame between them suddenly flickered, catching Darcy’s eye – and she stared as it suddenly began twisting around in a spiral. John reached up and cupped his hands, a flicker danced from the candle across to them, and suddenly there was a glowing orb of fire suspended between his palms.

“I won’t show you any more here,” he said quietly, pressed his hands together and the fire went out, the candle flame resuming its normal flicker. “Too dangerous indoors.”

“Wow,” Darcy breathed, her eyes huge. “Fire! That’s so *cool*. Well, hot.”

John grinned at her, reached to take her hands. The smile dropped off his face, though, as Darcy asked “Do you have a code name?”

“I did. I don’t use it any more, really. I – made some pretty stupid mistakes when I was younger. The name is – the X-Men know who I am, but it was public knowledge that I used to be...” he sighed as Darcy gave him a quizzical look. “I could probably, well certainly, still be prosecuted. I’ve done my best to make amends, to use whatever influence I have as a reporter to do things right this time.”

Darcy still didn’t understand. “What, were you with the Brotherhood of Mutants?” she said with a laugh.

John didn’t smile.

“Oh. My. God.” Darcy added two and two and came up with four. “*Pyro*.”

“I was young and dumb and hot-headed in more ways than one,” he said quietly. “My stupidity cost lives, it cost me my best friend, it set the cause of mutant rights back by *years*. By all rights I should be in prison, but,” he shrugged. “Once I realised that what I’d done was wrong, I went back to the X-Men. Helped them turn the tide of the war, and asked them to judge and sentence me when it was over. I don’t think I’d have fared well at the mercy of all-human courts.”

Darcy grimaced. He was perfectly correct in that, not in the aftermath of that mess.

“All the rest of the Brotherhood were either dead or escaped, and the ones that escaped, could never have been imprisoned safely. I’d have been the one to take the fall for all of it. The X-Men agreed it wasn’t fair, and offered me a deal. I could go free, but I would finish off my degree in journalism and then spend my life fighting for mutant rights *without* inciting anyone to

violence. Battle with the pen rather than the sword.”

Darcy nodded slowly, understanding. “I see.”

“If you don’t want to – I understand if you want to walk away,” John looked down at his hands, twisted his fingers together. “It’s a lot to ask of you, to accept me, knowing about my past.”

She reached out, put her hand over his. “John. We’ve all got stuff in our past we’re not proud of.”

“Are there dead people and betrayed friends in yours?” His eyes were hollow as he looked up and met her gaze.

“Not mine, no... but I consider Natasha Romanoff and Clint Barton to be two of my closest friends. And there’s more than enough blood staining their histories for anyone. They *chose* to change sides, to make the right choice when it was presented to them. How are you any different? Why are you any less deserving of forgiveness?”

John opened his mouth, but nothing came out. He just sat, staring at Darcy, who squeezed his fingers gently before continuing. “Nat calls it *red in her ledger*, that she has to wipe out. Making amends. So yes, I see exactly where you’re coming from, why you’re doing what you’re doing. What the X-Men asked of you was perfectly fair, and considering that I think I’ve read pretty much your whole portfolio, I’d say you’re more than holding up your end of the deal.” She held his eyes steadily. “In fact, if you’re willing – I’ve got some ideas for your next opinion piece.”

“I’m going to fall in love with you very fuckin’ quickly, Darcy Lewis,” he said huskily.

She smiled at him, her face alight with happiness. “Excellent. I think I was in love with your writing long before we met. The fact that you’re a hot superhero with a conscience is totally a bonus.”

The waiter delivered their meals just then, and there was a flurry of pepper-grinding and parmesan-grating and wine being poured. Darcy inhaled the vapour rising from her *fettucine carbonara*, sighed with pleasure, and twirled her fork, taking a quick bite. “Mm,” she mumbled as the ambrosial flavour hit her taste buds. She swallowed and looked up at John, smiling.

“And if you know any other secret little restaurants this good, I think I’ll be falling in love with you pretty quickly too.”

John grinned. “Aha. Well in that case, our eternal happiness is assured. I long ago hacked our food critic’s secret restaurant database.”

***Chapter 7*: Please Don't Cry (Jemma/Scott Lang)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/BioAnt_zps65pl0qff.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“It’s been *months*, Coulson.” May came to stand beside him in the secure storage room, both of them looking at the Monolith as it suddenly swooshed down to oily black liquid again, washing against the reinforced glass case before just as suddenly reforming. “We have to accept it. Jemma’s gone.”

Phil looked haggard and drawn, as weary as when he’d been in the worst grip of his hypergraphia. “We *have* to keep trying, May,” he said fiercely. “Simmons – she gave up so

much. Suffered as much as any of us. She was half in love with Trip, she was trying to build something with Fitz – I *can't* just let it go.”

“*We* won’t let it go,” another voice cut in, and they looked across the room at Tony Stark, who stood with Vision beside him, both of them tinkering with yet another scanner they’d built to try on the Monolith.

Phil had given in and made the call within two days of Jemma being sucked up by the Monolith. Stark had been here day and night ever since, other Avengers dropping by regularly. Wanda was the only one who had picked up anything at all; she swore Jemma was still alive in the stone, in a kind of stasis, but she couldn’t do anything, couldn’t reach her mentally.

Sam Wilson came in now, in deep conversation with Mack. He cut off when he saw Phil, came over and grabbed his arm. “Coulson. Listen – I might have a lead on someone else who could help.”

“I’m listening,” Phil said immediately.

“What do you know about a guy named Hank Pym?”

“It’s very risky,” Hank said quietly as they stood in front of the case. “You might not be able to get back out.”

“I know,” Scott answered, glancing at his mentor/boss. Hope stood slightly to one side, arms crossed. She’d wanted to go in, but Hank had argued her down. Besides, they needed her suit. Scott was going to carry it in for Jemma, in the hope that he could find her.

“If I don’t come out,” Scott looked around the room, at the gathered group, “take care of Cassie for me?”

“She’ll never want for anything,” Tony promised. “I swear it. Whether you come back or not, Lang.”

“We’ll make sure she’s safe,” Coulson promised just as fervently. “Always.”

They were all standing on a platform that Mack had built, suspended from the ceiling, well above the height the black wave could reach to. Scott took a deep breath, snapped his helmet shut, and jumped down to the floor. Walking across to the big case, he clicked open the row of beefed-up latches that Mack had installed, glanced up at Mack crouched on the roof of the case. He’d close it once Scott was gone.

“Good luck, man. Bring our girl home,” Mack said quietly, and Scott nodded to him and swung the door open.

Nothing happened.

Scott reached out to touch the stone. Stepped up into the case and poked his fingers into one of the strange, square cavities. “How do I set it off?” he turned to look at Coulson, and the Monolith collapsed.

It was so *fast*. Three seconds, if that, Scott flailing as he was swept off his feet, and then he was gone and the Monolith was still again.

“Now what?” Hope broke the silence as Mack closed the door.

“Now, we wait,” Hank said.

Whatever Scott had expected to find ‘inside’ the stone, it hadn’t been endless long, dark corridors. He jogged along swiftly, trying to go in a straight line, if he had to make a turning

always choosing left, using a sharp tool to scratch tally marks into the stone floor at junctions. He'd been searching for a while when he heard a sound other than his own footsteps. He stopped abruptly, listening intently.

There it was again, a low, muffled sound. He turned his head, tuning it in, wishing he had the ants with him, but he hadn't wanted to bring them into a situation so totally unknown. Determining the direction, he set off jogging again, turned a corner – and saw her.

Dressed in a spotted blouse and slacks, she sat on the floor, back to the wall, knees drawn up to her chest, her face in her hands, sobbing in such abject misery that Scott's heart wrenched in his chest.

He pulled his helmet off – she was breathing okay, so he'd live – and hurried close, dropping to his knees before her.

"Hey, please don't cry. I've come to get you out."

Jemma's head snapped up, her eyes opening wide and her mouth too. She stared, utterly stunned, at the handsome dark-haired man kneeling in front of her wearing some kind of strange red, black and silver suit. "Y-y-you came," she sniffled, trying vainly to suppress her sobs.

"Yes, Coulson sent me – wait, what?" Scott blinked.

Jemma gave him a very watery smile. "I was wondering how long I'd have to wait for you. I feel like I've been here for *days*."

She certainly didn't look like she'd been trapped in here for three months, Scott realised. Time must be flowing differently inside here. He swallowed. Even tear-stained and blotchy, she was a very pretty girl indeed, with her wavy light brown hair and huge hazel eyes.

"While I'd really love to celebrate finding my soulmate," he said quietly, "our first priority has to be getting out of here. And I don't really know if we can, yet."

"You came in to look for me without knowing if you'd be able to get out?" Jemma said in disbelief. "But you don't even know me!"

When she put it that way, it sounded like the dumbest thing he'd ever done, even though there was some pretty stiff competition for that award. Scott smiled sheepishly. "I'm still glad I did, even if we don't get out."

"Oh God," Jemma let out a choked little laugh. "My soulmate's a superhero!"

Shrugging, he held out his hand to help her to her feet. "More like a micro-hero." She looked puzzled, and he grinned. "You'll see."

"I'm Jemma," she said shyly, as he helped her up.

"Scott. Scott Lang." He was tallish, close to the six foot mark, and had lovely light green eyes and an adorable little cleft in his chin. Jemma lost herself in his eyes for a moment.

She was really pretty, slim and dainty, soft hazel eyes and the cutest sprinkling of freckles across the bridge of her nose. His eyes dropped to her mouth, pink and a little puffy and swollen after her tears, and he licked his lips and moved closer.

"This is probably a really bad time," Scott breathed against her mouth.

"Uh-huh," she reached up, unsure where she could put her hands safely on his suit, settled for pressing them against his chest lightly. "Don't care."

"Kay then." His lips were warm and soft, gentle as they moved over hers, and Jemma sighed into his mouth and moved a little closer, feeling his arms come around her and hold her.

"Mm." Scott broke the kiss with a regretful sigh after a few moments. "Nice though it would be to stand her and do that forever, we need to try and get out of here."

"Right." Jemma tried to gather her scattered thoughts. "How are we going to do that?"

Nothing ever changes in here. I'm assuming the Monolith turned back to its liquid state at least once to suck you in, but I didn't see anything.

"Yeah," Scott nodded. "I daresay you'll be better able to understand the science than I did when Hank explains it to you, but basically, he did some scans and determined that the Monolith is composed of a substance formerly unknown on Earth. Its subatomic structure is fundamentally different to any known element."

Jemma was watching him with her clear eyes, and he found his mind wandering, thinking of how lovely she was, how clever, even as he tried to concentrate, to explain how the suits worked and how Hank had thought they could adjust their regulators and use the Pym Particles to escape the stone prison.

"Right," Jemma said with a nod finally. "I can see I'll have to ask Dr Pym some more questions. How *fascinating*. But – there's only the one suit. Isn't there?"

"Nope," he shrugged off the pack on his back. "I brought one for you too. It's Hope's – she's Hank's daughter – but it should fit you well enough. She's a bit taller but that won't make too much difference. Um, you'll need to take your clothes off, though."

Jemma arched her eyebrows at him and smirked, and Scott found himself chuckling. "Honestly! It won't fit over what you're wearing. I swear it's not just an excuse for me to see you undressed. Not that I *don't* want to see you undressed, but..."

"Oh, hush, you babbling idiot," she said in a fond tone and started to unbutton her blouse. Scott gulped, eyes riveted to the soft creamy flesh she revealed as the high collar opened – at the black words just above the top of her breasts.

"I'll expect a reveal in kind when we get out of here," Jemma told him, discarding the blouse a little sadly – it was one of her favourites – and unfastening her slacks.

"Arglfngnh," Scott said eloquently, as Jemma finished and stood before him in just a pretty satin bra and panties, navy with cream polka dots and just a little cream lace around the bra cups.

"I'm assuming I can keep my underwear on?" Jemma took the suit trousers from him and examined them before starting to pull them on.

I should have said no, Scott realised as she pulled the stiff pants up her slender legs. *We might die and then I'll have missed my chance to see her naked*. But then if they *did* get out and she found out he'd lied to her – no, probably a good thing he'd been unable to speak at that moment. Reaching out, he helped her with the stiff fastenings on the suit jacket, and if his fingers trembled a little as they brushed her soft skin – well, neither of them said anything, but Jemma stared up at him the whole while, her lips parted and soft.

He handed her the helmet, holding on when she took it from him. "One last kiss," he said quietly, and she reached up eagerly, her mouth sweet under his. Scott closed his eyes and savoured her for a long moment before pulling back and helping her put the helmet on. Putting his own on, leaving the faceplate open for the moment, he took her hand.

"Okay," he said, squeezing her fingers comfortingly. "The controls of your suit are slaved to mine. All you have to do is hold onto my hand, alright? *Don't let go*."

"I understand," Jemma said after a nervous swallow. She brought up her other hand and latched it onto his wrist. Scott smiled at her before snapping his faceplate on.

"I'm gonna get you home, Jemma," he promised, focussing on the *need* to get back. Putting his hand on the regulator at his belt, he tightened his hold on Jemma's hand – and ran straight at the wall in front of them. Jemma's shriek echoed in his ears as the universe *twisted*

around them...



“Open it!” Hank Pym yelled suddenly, and a monitor started to beep loudly.

Tony slammed on the button he’d put in to remotely operate the case’s latches, and they popped open, the door swinging wide. At that moment Tony saw what Pym had seen, two tiny figures tumbling from one of the holes in the Monolith, getting rapidly bigger, until they were sprawling to the floor outside the case, wrapped in each other’s arms.

Tony mashed his finger down on another button and a hydraulic arm pushed the case shut, the latches clicking again.

“Scott!” Hank climbed painfully down from the platform. “Are you all right? Dr Simmons?”

Scott snapped his faceplate up, grinning as he scrambled to his feet, stooping to help Jemma up and then pulling her close. The room was almost empty, he noticed vaguely, only Hank and Tony Stark in there, and there seemed to be even more machinery around. “How long was I gone?” he asked curiously.

“Almost two weeks,” Hank nodded at his astonished expression. “How long did it feel like, inside?”

“An hour, maybe two?” Jemma had pulled her helmet off, dropped it to the floor and buried her face in Scott’s chest, clinging to him. “Ah, and I found my soulmate,” Scott grinned proudly.

Hank blinked, startled, and then a slow smile spread across his face. “I’m very glad for you, Scott. Congratulations.”

Tony had already communicated the good news, and the door slid open a few moments later and what seemed to be half of SHIELD and most of the Avengers came running in, throwing themselves at the returned pair and hugging them enthusiastically.

Jemma’s friend Fitz, the young Scottish engineer, was sobbing over her, Scott noticed. Coulson had told him that Fitz and Jemma had been making tentative steps towards a romantic relationship when she was captured by the Monolith. Feeling suddenly in the way, Scott tried to move backwards but Jemma reached out and grabbed his hand.

“My soulmate saved me,” she said loudly, turning to look up at Scott, her eyes glowing with joy.

“Oh.” Fitz pulled back, there was a sudden silence in the room. Mack put a steadying hand on Fitz’s shoulder. “Oh – I see. Well.” Fitz visibly squared his shoulders, and then he held out a hand to Scott, forcing a smile. “Thank you. Thank you so very much. It means more than you can ever know to have Jemma back with m–, with *us*.”

Scott nodded, shaking Fitz’s hand with an understanding smile in return. How terrible, to have your heart so publicly broken. The engineer was being very brave about it. Mack guided Fitz away gently, giving Scott a slight nod of acknowledgement.

Throughout all the tearful reunions and new introductions for Jemma, she never let go of Scott’s hand, and he didn’t try to pull away, a warm, comforting presence at her side. Telling Fitz like that had been terrible, but she couldn’t let him hear it from anyone else, and she couldn’t bear to be away from Scott for even a moment. Better to be honest, to let Fitz know quickly, like ripping off a Band-Aid, though that was a poor analogy for a broken heart.

Turning to Scott in a quiet moment, she found his eyes trained on her, a serious look in

their green depths. He *knew*, Jemma realised, knew that she and Fitz had been tentatively trying to build something between them.

"I know I hurt him," she said quietly, "and it tore my heart out, because he's my best friend. But – after only a few minutes with you, it's so obvious to me now that there was never that *something*, that *spark*, between me and Fitz."

Scott squeezed on her hand. "It's all right, Jemma. I get it." He really did. He'd thought he loved Maggie, loved her enough to marry her, to have a child with her – but it fell apart when she met her soulmate. Of course it did. He understood, now, the all-encompassing need to be with that *one person*, the other half of his soul. No woman before Jemma had mattered, none of them had truly counted. He stood staring into her eyes as slowly the world around them faded away until there was nothing but the two of them.

"*Soulmates*," Phil said in disgust as Jemma and the Ant-Man started kissing passionately in the middle of the crowd, utterly disregarding everyone else present.

***Chapter 8*: The Wrong Choice (Grant Ward/Kitty Pryde)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%202/ShadowSpecialist_zpsf1tk6w2r.jpg-REPLACE_ME

"He's cuuute," Jubilee nudged Kitty in the ribs. "Go on. Go introduce yourself, I dare you."

Rogue chuckled. "Yah've done it now, Jubes, Kitty can never resist a dare!"

Illyana, on her other side, was unusually silent, but Kitty had already had a few drinks and was feeling bold. They'd all been eyeing the tall, exceedingly handsome dark-haired man ever since he walked into the upscale hotel bar where they were holding their girls' night out and ordered himself a drink.

He gave no apparent notice to the four young women eyeing him and giggling together, but Kitty had the definite feeling that he'd taken in and noted every detail about everyone in the room. There was something tragic about him, about the grim lines of his face, the hollows beneath his sharply carved cheekbones, the dark circles under his eyes that spoke of sleepless nights. She wanted, suddenly, to comfort him, to hold his head to her breast and stroke her fingers through his dark hair, croon soft words until he slept peacefully in her arms.

"Oh, what the hell." She downed her drink. "Worst he can do is shoot me down in flames, huh?"

Rogue and Jubilee both laughed. Illyana snorted disparagingly.

"He could be a serial killer, Katya."

"Well that's why I have friends to watch my back!" Kitty giggled, patted Illyana's shoulder. "Stop being so gloomy and Russian!" She got up and walked across the bar, concentrating on keeping her steps steady.

"You're too handsome to drink alone," she said cheerfully, sliding onto the barstool beside Mr Tall Dark Sex God.

He blinked unfairly long black eyelashes at her. *Wasted on a man*, Kitty thought disgustedly. She waited, heart in her mouth, for him to speak. *Please be the one. Please.*

At first glance, Grant had thought the tiny brunette was a child. A second unobtrusive

look had told him she was probably the same age as the other young women she was drinking with, twenty-two or three, and certainly this hotel wouldn't be risking their liquor licence serving anyone under-age, they'd have carded her carefully. So, she was just tiny. A scant five foot if that, he assessed as she got up and walked a bit unsteadily across the floor towards him. *Can't take her liquor. Unsurprising with a body weight of about eighty pounds, really.*

And then she opened her mouth and said his soulmark words, making him blink with surprise.

"I prefer to drink alone," he said at last, hoping that she would show no sign of recognition. He'd probably given himself away with his own surprised glance, but really – he didn't *want* his soulmate. His soul was stained black and anyone who shared the other half of it – either they would be someone equally dark and irredeemable, or they would be the match for the decent person he could have been if his family and Garrett hadn't corrupted him, in which case they were most definitely better off without him.

"Oh my God, it's *you!*" Kitty squealed, hands going to her mouth in amazed delight. "Do you have any *idea* how many random guys I've approached in bars because of you?"

Unwillingly, he felt his lips twitch up in a smile. She was a cute little thing, even if not his preferred type – her hair was too light and too short in that pixie cut, her eyes green-brown, not so dark as to be almost black. "Sorry."

"It's okay, I only turned twenty-one a couple of years ago, but of course you know that," Kitty chattered happily, "and Logan would have had a heart attack if I had a fake ID before that, so it hasn't been too many times. Wow, you're *really* handsome." She leaned her chin on her hand and gazed at him. "I feel *super* lucky. I'm Kitty, by the way. Kitty Pryde."

Grant said nothing. What could he possibly say? She was young and sweet and he absolutely couldn't have anything to do with her. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, "but – I can't."

Kitty stared at him. At the genuine pain on his face. "What is it?" she asked gently, compassionately.

He just shook his head. "You don't want me, Kitty. I'm not a good person."

"You could *choose* to be," Kitty reached out unconsciously, putting her fingers atop his, where they rested on the bar. "I could help you. Please. Let me..."

"No!" He pulled his hand away. "I'm sorry," he said again, standing up. Tossing a few bills on the bar to pay for his drink, he headed for the door.

Shocked, Kitty didn't hesitate. Darting around in front of him, she put a hand to his chest, looking up into his dark eyes across the more than a foot of height difference between them.

"Don't go. Please."

"You don't know what you're asking." He stepped around her, walked out, headed for the hotel elevator.

Kitty's friends were crowding around her, asking what was wrong. She dashed angry, frustrated tears from her eyes. "Not now, guys!"

Dashing after him, she saw the elevator doors closing.

Grant hadn't thought much could shock him anymore, but the sight of Kitty walking *through* the closed elevator doors just before the car started to move made his jaw drop inelegantly. "What the *fuck?*"

"You won't get rid of me that easily." Kitty folded her arms and stared up at him. "Now what's your name?"

"Grant Ward," he said, too stunned to lie or dissemble. "How did you...?"

"I'm X-gene." She smirked at him. "And I'm *very* persistent."

He regrouped, shook his head at her. "Look, Kitty – you're young, I get that you've still got all these romantic dreams about soulmates and how it's Meant To Be and all that shit. But you don't want me. I've fucked up too much shit in my life. Made too many mistakes."

"Maybe I'm meant to help you fix them. Didja think of *that*, Grant?" She cocked her head pertly.

"I shot my last girlfriend twice in the stomach," he said flatly. "She died in my arms, drowning as her lungs filled up with her own blood."

Kitty shrank back against the elevator wall, her eyes wide with horror.

"Some things can't be fixed, Kitty." He shook his head at her. "I've got too many enemies. They'd destroy my soulmate if they found out I had one. And if *they* don't, I *would*. I destroy everything I touch."

There was utter silence for a moment. And then the elevator doors pinged and slid open. Ward hit the ground floor button and walked out without a backward glance.

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The doors opened again and Kitty stumbled out into the waiting arms of her friends. Her tears blinded her, wrenching sobs wracking her tiny frame.

Rogue, unable to touch Kitty to comfort her, shared a look with Illyana over Kitty's head and pulled out her phone as Illyana and Jubilee gently guided Kitty to a couch in a dark corner of the hotel lobby and sat her down, arms around her as she sobbed out her heartbreak.

"Oh, Katya," a deep voice rumbled finally, strong arms lifted her tenderly, and she curled against a broad chest, the familiar, comforting scent of her friend surrounding her. "Hush now. You're safe now, *kotyonok moi*. I have you safe."

It wasn't until Jean touched her mind and drove her down into sleep that the sobs finally stopped, though.

"Will she be all right?" Piotr stood over the bed in the mansion's medical centre, arms folded across his chest. His sister stood beside him, her expression concerned.

"Eventually," Jean looked up at Piotr. "She's young. She still believes that finding one's soulmate inevitably leads to happily ever after." Her lovely face was sorrowful. "Her soulmate did the only decent thing he could, sending her away. He's not a good man, and he knows it." Patting Kitty's lax hand on the sheet gently, she said, "She will need someone to love her unconditionally."

"You know already that I do!"

"*Everyone* knows that you do, except Katya herself," Illyana said with a snort.

"I have no soulmark, Illyana, and Kitty does! I'm not so selfish as to try to take for myself that which is meant for another..."

"It isn't any more," Jean said quietly. "He rejected her. Her mark will fade, in time."

Piotr stilled. And then he slowly unfolded his arms and reached for a chair, sat down beside the bed. "Then I will wait. As long as I must."

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Kitty woke with sore, hurting eyes and a bruised heart. Cracking her eyes open a fraction she saw Piotr sitting by her bed, reading a book.

"Piotr," she whispered, and immediately he dropped the book and leaned over her.

“Katya!” His huge hand hovered uncertainly over hers. “Oh, *kotyonok moi*.” His brown eyes were gentle. “I am so sorry.”

She began to cry again and he gathered her in his arms, holding her close, and rocked her gently until she quieted.

All her friends stepped warily around Kitty. None of them quite seemed to know what to say to her. Only Piotr treated her as he had always done, even when in her pain and misery she snapped at him harshly. He only took her hand in his and squeezed it gently.

“Why do you put up with me?” she said in despair one day. “I’ve been *such* a bitch.”

He smiled in his quiet way. “Don’t you know, Katya?”

She shied away from thinking about what he meant.

“It’s fading,” Kitty said quietly to Illyana one day a few weeks later, as the two of them sat together in the mansion’s magnificent gardens, enjoying the sunshine.

Illyana looked at her friend’s forearm, at the once-black lettering which was now a misty grey.

“Will you wait until it is gone completely?” the Russian girl asked dryly.

“Wait for what?” Kitty stared at her, puzzled.

“To see what is right in front of your eyes, Katya!” Illyana rolled her eyes, exasperated.

Kitty’s frown deepened, and Illyana’s temper snapped.

“My brother has been in love with you since the day he first laid eyes on you, idiot! He eats his heart out over you and all you do is cry on his shoulder!” Getting up, she flounced off towards the mansion, waving her hands and talking to herself in voluble Russian.

Kitty sat, open-mouthed and stunned. A quiet rustle behind her made her turn around, and she saw Rogue standing there. The Southern girl looked at her for a few moments before coming to sit beside her.

“Did *you* know?” Kitty asked after a couple of minutes of silence.

“Ah think yah’re the only person in the mansion who didn’t.” Rogue’s green eyes were sympathetic.

“But,” Kitty said, finally getting over her shock, “he’s *Piotr*.”

“Yes?” Rogue raised a quizzical eyebrow.

“I mean, look at him! He’s – he could have anyone he wanted!”

Rogue said nothing.

“*Really?*” Kitty said eventually, her voice wondering.

“Really. Now what’re yah gonna do ‘bout it? Bearing in mind that Illyana will kill yah if yah break his heart.”

“I wouldn’t, I...” Kitty trailed off. “I’ve been breaking his heart for years, haven’t I,” she said in a small voice.

“Yah can’t blame yahself for that. Not your fault. There’s no shame in holdin’ out for yahr soulmate, Piotr understood that.” Rogue tapped a gloved finger on the fading grey words on Kitty’s arm. “It’s what yah do now that counts.”

Grant Ward stood outside the church, eyes trained on the door. He felt numb, sick. Two years. She hadn’t even waited *two years*. He watched as the giant groom lifted his tiny, joyously

laughing bride in his arms to the cheers of the watching guests, carried her to the waiting limousine, kissed her before joining her inside.

She was *his*. She was meant to be *his*. Grant's fists clenched at his sides – and something cold and very sharp pricked the side of his neck.

Turning his head slowly, he looked along the length of three gleaming adamantium blades into hard dark eyes.

"The Wolverine, I presume?" he said, careful to keep his voice level.

"Correct. And allow me to introduce Gambit, Deadpool, Cyclops, Storm, Nightcrawler, Iceman, Rogue and Jean Grey. And Illyana Rasputin," Logan nodded towards the icily beautiful blonde in the bridesmaid's dress. "Sister of the groom. A very powerful sorceress."

Grant's eyes flickered over the assembled group. He'd heard of all of them. They were all staring at him from hard eyes, their expressions ranging from *disapproving* to *enraged*.

"What are you doing here?" It was Illyana who spoke. "Katya's mark faded. You *rejected* her."

Faded. Her mark *faded*. The words thundered inside his head, and Grant realised just how big a mistake he'd made. Mouth dry, he said "I was just leaving."

"Yes," Logan growled. "You were."

"If I ever see you near my brother or Katya again," Illyana said softly, "I *will* kill you."

He didn't doubt her.

"You're being kind, Illyana," Logan growled. "If I *ever* see you again, I'll kill you. Better start running, Grant Ward. I'm givin' you one hour and then I'm comin' after you."

He took a step back, away from those piercing eyes, those viciously sharp blades. Looked around at the others, pausing at Storm and Jean Grey; he'd heard they were among the X-Men's leaders. But they both looked at him with hard, pitiless eyes, and then Storm's eyes turned white and thunder rumbled in the distance.

Grant Ward whirled around and ran for his life.

kotyonok moi – my kitten

***Chapter 9*: My Beautiful Monster (Loki/Raina)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/TrickSeer_zpsezttdy.jpg-REPLACE_ME

"Sire!"

Loki looked up from the Council table, startled. "Heimdall?"

"Sire, I need you to come with me – *now*."

"You will excuse me," Loki said perfunctorily to the men and women seated around the table. A chorus of;

"Of course, All-Father," followed him as he strode to the door.

"What's going on, Heimdall?" Loki asked quietly as the two strode out of the palace. Heimdall had horses waiting for them and Loki swung up into his saddle.

"There's a problem on Midgard," Heimdall said succinctly as they turned towards the Bifrost.

“Thor again? The Avengers?”

“Someone important is dying.”

“Mortals die, Heimdall, that’s what they *do*,” Loki said irritably, but he didn’t rein his horse in, and they were soon galloping along the bridge. It wasn’t until they reached the Bifrost chamber that Loki dropped the illusion of Odin’s appearance, though. “So who is this mortal that’s so important?” Loki grumbled as Heimdall moved forward, drawing Hofund from its sheath and setting the point of the huge blade to the waiting slot in the mechanism. “And what am I supposed to do?”

“Save her,” Heimdall answered. “Your mother told me that she would one day be very important to Asgard. That day has not yet come.”

“Frigga...?” was all Loki had time to say before the whirling rainbow of lights sucked him in.

He landed in darkness, trees all around him, a small wooden bridge over a little stream close by. It took a couple of blinks for his eyes to adjust to the dimness, after the bright Asgardian day he had just left and the even brighter lights of the Bifrost. And then he saw her, just a crumpled bundle on the ground, like a pile of rags thrown out. There was no one else close, his senses told him that, no danger, so he knelt and reached out to the crumpled figure, sweeping aside the hood that had fallen over her face.

“Ehhh!” Loki startled back as sharp spines prickled at his fingers. “What manner of creature is *this*?” He had never seen anything like it, in all his travels and all his research. Roughly humanoid, it was covered in spikes and thorns. “*This*, Heimdall? *Really*?” he muttered under his breath, extending his magic, feeling for life. There was a tiny, tiny spark remaining, not enough even to keep her heart beating, but she had no wounds on her at all, and Loki frowned, confused, before sucking in his breath sharply as he realised her life had been *stolen*, sucked out by some ghastly vampiric ability.

“Poor creature,” he murmured, moved to sudden compassion, “no matter your appearance, no one deserves such a fate.” She was beyond his minor skills at healing, but Eir might be able to help. In the meantime, he could at least preserve the body, arrest any process of decay. Gently, he set his fingertip against her cheek, on a spot of smooth skin between rows of thorns, and summoned his Jotun ice powers.

Loki did not stop, not even when magic poured unexpectedly back through him. It wasn’t until the body was encased in a thin, shimmering layer of blue ice that he lifted his hand and stared at the rune shimmering on his fingertip.

“Seer,” he translated the symbol incredulously, stared down at the creature – his soulmate! – in her icy coffin. There was a rune on her cheek where his finger had touched; his own sigil.

“Well,” Loki said quietly. “Now I see why Mother thought you were important.” He stood staring down at her for a moment before turning his face up to the sky. “Heimdall!”

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Raina blinked her eyes open slowly, looked curiously up at a sparkling blue dome above her face. Above her whole body, as she looked down. And then she opened her mouth and screamed.

“No! No!”

“Hush!” a firm voice said, the dome above her blinked out, and a face came into her

view.

"I have to die, I saw it, you mustn't let it happen!" she grabbed at him, got a handful of green cloth. "Jiaying, she's going to kill so many, I have to die so that Skye will stop her..."

"Jiaying is dead," Loki reassured quietly, trying to disengage his soulmate's hand from his cloak, hissing as her thorns scraped at him. "Skye stopped the release of the crystals, Heimdall watched it all. And you *did* die, but you're back now."

"The drug, the GH-325, you used that?" but Raina's attention was caught suddenly by his face. "You're *Loki*," she whispered in sudden shock.

"Yes, I am." She was already looking around, taking in her surroundings, the technological equipment so far in advance of Earth's everywhere her huge yellow-gold eyes landed. "And yes, this is Asgard," he continued dryly, before she asked.

"Why am I here? How long has it been?" Raina demanded.

"It has been eleven days, as you would count time. And as for why you are here..." Loki held his hand out towards her, palm forward. "Do you see this?"

There was a strange blue mark on his forefinger, squiggly lines and dots. "Yes, what is it?"

"It means, *Seer*, in the language of my people." He didn't mention, yet, that the language he meant was Jotun. Conjuring a mirror, he held it up. "There is a corresponding mark on your cheek; my personal sigil. It appeared when I touched you to give you aid after you were left to die."

"I don't understand." The huge golden eyes were vulnerable as she looked up at him.

"You are my soulmate."

Raina looked at him for a long moment, and then she began to laugh harshly, wracking cackles that had more than a hint of a sob in them. "You do not want *me*," she ground out finally. "I was beautiful once, but now look at me! I'm a monster."

"Then," Loki said quietly, "we shall be monsters together." Slowly, he allowed the magic that held him in Asgardian form to drain away.

Raina stared open-mouthed as he revealed himself, his blue Jotun skin, the whorls and markings on his face. "A blue angel," she whispered reverently.

"Hardly," a dry voice said from the other side of the room, and Raina spun, wincing as she caught herself on her own thorns.

"Who are you?" she spat out.

"I am Odin, King of Asgard," the white-haired man moved forward.

"Here we go," Loki said in resignation. "Please don't compare *this* one to a goat, Father?"

"A porcupine would seem more apt, my son," Odin smiled a little wryly, "but do not fear, I have learned my lesson as regards Midgardians, especially their women."

Loki sighed and rubbed his hands over his eyes, realising as he lowered them that they were still blue – and yet Odin seemed unconcerned. He'd returned to Asgard with his soulmate's frozen body and taken her to the healers. Returning to Odin's chambers, which he'd been using as his own, he'd been horrified to find his father waiting for him. But it seemed that Odin was not merely refreshed by his long sleep, but that he had also meditated on many things while he rested.

"What is your name, child?" Odin asked quietly, moving closer.

"Raina," she said, somewhat overawed by the aura of sheer *power* he exuded, but

determined not to show fear.

“If you were given a choice between regaining your beauty, or retaining your power of foresight, which would you choose?”

She hesitated. Glanced at Loki, who had resumed his Asgardian form, so handsome, tall and dark-haired. But she’d seen his true self, had heard the honesty in his voice when he told her they would be monsters together. And – she’d learned something important, in the last few days. Learned that there were causes bigger than herself, than the selfishness she’d always found it easy to give in to.

“My gift is too important,” she said quietly, “for me to sacrifice it for vanity’s sake.”

Odin nodded slowly, glanced at Loki with something which looked very much like pride. “There speaks my son’s soulmate.” Looking back at Raina, he said “I cannot take your gift from you even if you wished it, child. But I *can* give you that which I gave my son; a guise to walk freely and not be feared by those who cannot accept that raiment does not make the man. Or indeed, the woman.”

Raina blinked, bemused, as Odin reached out and passed his hand slowly over her face. And then she gasped as, for the first time since the Mist had changed her into a figure out of nightmare, she felt no pain. No thorns tearing at her insides, snagging her own skin when she moved.

Loki nodded his thanks at Odin as the All-Father withdrew, closing the door quietly behind him, leaving them alone. Raina was touching her cheeks incredulously with her fingertips, running her fingers over her curly black hair, her magnificent eyes wide with astonishment. “Am I truly – did he...”

“It is a spell,” Loki shook his head. “A true shape-shift, though, far more complete than the illusions I could cast for you. Odin sacrificed a good deal of power to give you this gift. I can teach you how to control it, to change between your two forms at will.”

“*Why?*” she stared up at him as he came to stand beside her, conjuring the mirror again for her to look at her face. “Why would he do that for me?”

Loki’s fingers brushed her cheek, where the blue sigil still remained, the one thing unchanged from her other form. “Because he does not believe that a Princess of Asgard would be accepted by her people if she does not look as they do.”

“*P-princess of Asgard?!*”

“And Jotunheim. I’m not technically heir to either of them, though,” he shrugged self-deprecatingly, making the mirror disappear since she showed no inclination to look in it. Reaching for her hand, he took it gently, assisted her in getting down from the bier she’d been resting on. Standing, she barely reached his shoulder.

Raina tilted her head to look up at him. “Princess,” she whispered, awed.

“Indeed.” Loki raised his free hand. She was wearing a simple white garment, standard garb in the Healing chambers. His powers were more than sufficient to change it to something he thought suited her, a flowing, soft drape in deep lavender that set off her beautiful light brown skin and stunning eyes. “There,” he smiled.

“Ohhh,” Raina breathed softly, looking down at the gown, swishing the skirt a little to feel the heavy, luxurious fabric drape against her legs. She looked up at Loki with a little smile. “Thank you, it’s beautiful, but – please could it have flowers on it?”

He laughed and waved his hand. A delicate tracery of flowers and leaves in golden thread climbed up from the hem of the gown, twisting and spiralling around her slender form. And in

Loki's hand there appeared a golden circlet, all flowers and swirling vines. It looked like something Titania might have worn, fit for a fairy queen. Gently, he set it atop her hair.

"Whatever my Princess desires."

Raina's eyes were lucent dark pools as she gazed up at him, and Loki couldn't help himself. He leaned down and pressed his lips softly to hers.

They were both smiling when he straightened up. And then tears came to Raina's eyes as Loki said quietly;

"You're beautiful. But I would still have kissed you even in your other form, because that's beautiful too."

"So is yours," she told him honestly. "My beautiful monster."

## **\*Chapter 10\*: What Did I Do? (Bucky/Jane)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/AstroSoldier\\_zps5nenqxkq.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/AstroSoldier_zps5nenqxkq.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Jane barely noticed when the Tower gained another new inhabitant. She was so close to a breakthrough on the Einstein-Rosen Bridge, she could almost *taste* it.

Since the whole disaster with Ultron, Tony and Bruce were no longer allowed to Science! together unsupervised. Darcy had been re-assigned to keep an eye on them – and report to Vision or Pepper if she thought they were getting out of hand – but since they regularly went on long Science!benders together, Jane rarely saw Darcy anymore. So there was no-one to notice that she was running on coffee and occasional Snickers bars.

Bucky had been living in Avengers Tower for an entire week before he realised that it actually had one more resident that he hadn't actually met (read: been enthusiastically introduced to by Steve).

"Who's the wraithlike brunette?" he asked Steve one afternoon.

"Hmm?" Steve looked up from the book he was reading.

"Tiny, long dark hair, looks like a breath of wind could blow her away? I thought she was just one of Stark's tech people but then I saw her going into the elevator to the accommodation floors last night, an' you already impressed on me that only people who live here can use that."

Steve had to think about it for a moment. "You must mean Dr. Foster."

"She's a doctor?" Bucky blinked curiously.

"Of astrophysics, no less. She's Thor's friend, the one who's been studying the Bifrost and how to re-create it from our end. Darcy used to be her intern." Steve looked slightly misty when talking about Darcy. Bucky rolled his eyes. Punk needed to get his act together and ask the girl out already.

"And Dr. Foster actually lives here?" he pressed.

"Sure, she moved in a few months ago."

"What does she eat?"

"What?" Steve blinked, bemused by the apparent *non sequitur*.

"Because Stark's got this fancy chef on hand who makes all our meals, we just have to go to the common floor to eat them. But I ain't seen Dr. Foster there yet. And with how much you an' I both eat, we're there at all hours."

"I – can't say I'd really thought about it," Steve admitted. "I don't know. Um. Maybe she orders food to her apartment?" He was buried in his book again within a couple of minutes and Bucky sighed, looking at his best friend fondly. *Well*. He'd just have to do his own investigative work, then. Leaving Steve alone, he headed down to Dr. Foster's labs. She was there, he saw through the glass panelled walls, her back to him – *face down on her desk?*

He knocked firmly on the glass. Dr. Foster didn't stir.

"JARVIS! I need access to this lab, right now!"

"Access denied, Sergeant Barnes," JARVIS replied politely.

"Dr. Foster isn't well, I need to get in!"

"Dr. Foster's biometrics indicate that she is asleep, Sergeant Barnes. There is no cause for concern. I am afraid I am unable to grant you access as this is not an emergency situation."

Bucky glared through the glass. "JARVIS. Is Dr. Foster's weight within normal parameters? And while you're checking that, what has she been eating and when?"

JARVIS was silent for a second or so. And then he said "Dr. Foster does appear to be below a healthy weight. She has lost seven pounds, three ounces since Miss Lewis was reassigned to Mr. Stark and Dr. Banner's laboratory. And her last balanced meal was – eleven days ago."

"Let me into that lab *right the fuck now* or we will find out if Stark's fancy rocket-proof glass can stand up to this arm." It was a fierce growl.

The lab door slid silently open.

The tiny doctor was a feather in Bucky's arms as he lifted her carefully. She let out a little sigh and nestled against his chest, her cheek resting against his metal shoulder as he carried her towards the elevator.

"The medical centre, please, JARVIS," he requested, "and ask Dr. Banner to meet me there, please?"

Bruce was already waiting for him as Bucky walked in. "Over here. JARVIS filled me in. I knew Jane wasn't much for taking care of herself but this is ridiculous," he muttered, bending over the sleeping woman as Bucky carefully laid her on the hospital bed.

*Jane*, Bucky thought. *What a plain name for such a beautiful woman*. Because she was beautiful, even too thin with her skin drawn tight over her cheekbones. He stood by as Bruce checked her over.

"Heart and lungs all right, but her body weight really is too low. I'd like to draw blood, see if she's anaemic, maybe put her on a saline drip because she's possibly a bit dehydrated too." Bruce shook Jane's shoulder gently. "Jane? Jane, can you wake up? It's Bruce."

"Umm," Jane mumbled sleepily, "jussa bi' longer..." but Bruce shook her again, and she sighed grumpily and opened her eyes. To see the Winter Soldier looming over her, arms folded, glowering disapprovingly. She shrieked with fright, jackknifing upright, accidentally head-butting Bruce in the face. He stumbled back, clutching at his nose.

"Oh shit oh shit, don't turn green!" she pleaded in panic.

"S'okay," Bruce mumbled after a few uneasy moments, "I'm okay." He lowered his hand, revealing just a couple of drops of blood on his nose and upper lip. "Just gonna go clean up." He backed out of the room, opening the door with his elbow to avoid getting blood on it.

"Lie down, you little idiot," Bucky said disapprovingly, putting his hand on Jane's shoulder and pushing. She resisted, surprisingly strong for such a frail-looking woman, glaring at him.

“What am I doing here, anyway?”

He blinked.

She blinked.

“*What* did you say?” they both said, at the same time.

Bucky cast his eyes up to the ceiling. “What did I do?” he said plaintively, “was Steve not impossible enough to look after, God? Now you’ve sent me a female version without even the sense to feed herself.”

“Hey, I resemble that remark!” but Jane was grinning. Her soulmate was *hot*, even when he was all scowly, and she could see a little smile just tugging at the corners of his luscious mouth. “Maybe that’s why you’re my soulmate,” she offered, “all that time spent looking after Steve before he got the serum was just practice...”

“I’ll give you practice,” he growled, bending over her. “Practice laying down on that bed quietly until Bruce gets back, and then practice at eating a healthy meal, or I’ll put you over my knee.”

Jane’s eyes were very wide and dark as she stared up at him. “Does it have to be *either or*?” she whispered. “Because I quite like the sound of both options.”

Bruce pushed open the door a couple of minutes later, cotton wool balls stuffed ungracefully up both nostrils, and stopped dead at the sight of Bucky and Jane, tangled in each other’s arms on the bed, passionately kissing, Jane’s nails squeaking on Bucky’s metal shoulder as she clawed frantically, trying to get even closer to him, even though from what Bruce could see they were as close as two people could possibly get with their clothes still on.

“Am I interrupting something?” Bruce said loudly.

“Yes,” Bucky lifted his head just long enough to say.

Bruce sighed and shook his head. “I guess I’ll come back later.” Heading out the door, he muttered, “With food.”

### **\*Chapter 11\*: Happiness In HYDRA (Brock Rumlow/Grant Ward)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/RumWard\\_zps42iwvx7o.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/RumWard_zps42iwvx7o.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

There was a surprising amount of hidden HYDRA infrastructure still available for his use, Ward discovered. And the remaining soldiers were rudderless, desperate for leadership, frantically leaping all over themselves to accept his direction, obey his every command. It was a heady feeling, this power – but despite the air of certainty he projected for those now looking to him for leadership, deep inside him, Grant Ward was afraid.

Garrett had given him purpose. Direction, security, *orders*. Now *he* was the one giving the orders, and he was *terrified* of fucking it up. Every decision he’d made in the last few months seemed to have only plunged him deeper into the morass – he shied away from thinking about Kara, about the shocked look of betrayal in her eyes as she choked out her life in his arms, and even more from thinking about Skye, about the combination of hate and fear with which she’d looked at him on the Bus as he tried to explain. He’d been *right* in all his decisions, he was still sure of it – but somehow those decisions had ended with him in a place very different to what he’d thought he wanted.

Slamming the door to his commandeered office, Ward stalked across to his desk and

looked bleakly at the paperwork strewn across it. *Paper*, for fuck's sake! Typed and printed on computers they didn't dare connect to any kind of network, because he knew only too well that Skye and her damned Rising Tide buddies would be in their networks, reading his plans, before he could so much as blink.

In a sudden rage, he flung the papers aside with a rough sweep of his arm, smirking with visceral satisfaction as the pile fluttered to the floor in a disordered, crumpled mess. Someone else could deal with it later.

He opened the top drawer of the desk. Set the tumbler on the scratched wooden surface and half-filled it with brandy. The expensive stuff, too; HYDRA had some impressive stores. Sitting down in the chair, he took a long swig before putting his elbows on the desk and his face in his hands.

The room was dark, lit only by the bright moonlight pouring in through the windows; plenty of light for Ward to see what he was looking at, but there were shadows in the corners. He hadn't bothered with his usual professional check of the room, certain that no-one in HYDRA would *dare* enter his office uninvited.

So he was taken completely by surprise when a thickly muscled arm locked around his throat, jerking him up and out of the chair, the man grabbing him a few inches shorter than he so that his back was painfully bowed as he scrabbled instinctively at the arm across his throat, choking.

"You lack discipline, pretty boy," a harsh, rasping voice hissed in his ear, and Ward froze with shock.

He'd been born with those words on his ass. His father had taken them as a perfect excuse to discipline his middle son any way he saw fit, usually with a belt or cane lashed down precisely across the words, highlighting the scrawled black words with stinging red lines.

He couldn't speak, couldn't get a sound out with the compression on his throat. Just garbled, frantic sounds as the oxygen depleted through his bloodstream, weakened him. And then he was flung to the floor, landing hard on hands and knees. A booted toe prodded between his legs.

"Huh. Garrett was right about you. Said you liked *discipline*."

Aroused and achingly hard, Ward closed his eyes with shame. A strong hand curved under his chin and his head was jerked up to meet the eyes of the man squatting before him.

"Think you've got the balls to be in charge of HYDRA, do you, pretty boy?"

It took a moment for Ward to place him. The scars on his face, the voice more rasping than he remembered... but he could never forget those eyes, the coldly calculating, assessing stare. They'd never spoken – Rumlow was far too senior to him in both SHIELD and HYDRA for him to dare – but Ward knew very well who the other man was.

"I thought you were dead!" Ward whispered, his throat burning.

A gloved hand lifted to touch one scarred cheek briefly. "So does everyone else. My enemies, in particular."

Captain America, of course. Ward had seen the footage. Toe to toe with a supersoldier in an elevator, and Rumlow hadn't backed down. Had damned near *won*. He was a hero within HYDRA, a legend – a martyr for the Cause – but he *hadn't died*.

Rumlow was looking at him curiously. "You said my words, pretty boy."

"And you said mine – sir." Ward could feel his whole body relaxing, accepting Rumlow's dominance over him gratefully. "What are your orders, sir?"

Rumlow stood, a smooth, graceful motion, a smile touching his scarred lips. "Well. This changes things. Get up." He sat down in Ward's chair, gestured to Ward to stand in front of the desk. Picked up the brandy glass and took a thoughtful sip, his hard eyes watching as Ward stood up and moved to stand where Rumlow indicated, hands folded in front of him, standing at parade rest.

Rumlow tapped a finger against his lips, his smile widening. "You'll be the face of HYDRA. The pretty one, smiling for the cameras. You can do that, can't you, Grant?"

"Yes, sir." That would be easy. He was, after all, everyone's type. "You'll tell me what to say, sir?"

"Of course." Rumlow patted his knee. "Come here."

He went without hesitation. Sat in the older man's lap, relaxed into his hold, curving his spine and his face into Rumlow's stubbled throat, breathing in his scent and sighing with contentment.

"Good boy," Rumlow crooned softly, stroking the small of his back. "There's a good boy. My pretty boy, smiling for the cameras, while I'm the nightmare in the darkness."

"Yes, sir," Ward whispered, relaxing even further. It had been so long since anyone had properly taken charge of him. Told him what to do. Commanded his trust.

"Why don't you call me Master? You'd like that, wouldn't you?"

"Oh yes *please*, Master."

"There's a good boy."

## **\*Chapter 12\*: What Are The Odds? (Darcy/Rhodey/Sam)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/FalconTaserMachine%20copy\\_zpshk6qop15.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/FalconTaserMachine%20copy_zpshk6qop15.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

"And this is Colonel James Rhodes, aka War Machine," Steve introduced, "Rhodey, my friend Sam Wilson, the Falcon."

"It's an honour, sir," Sam said genuinely. He wasn't in uniform so couldn't salute the senior Air Force officer, but he stood at attention and bowed his head respectfully.

"I've heard a lot about you, Wilson," Rhodey said cheerfully, his eyes taking in the younger man. He'd heard about Wilson long before, about how the youngster had been one of the service's brightest stars, an amazing pararescue flyer before the crash that claimed the life of his best friend (some unkindly whispered that Riley had been Wilson's lover) had led to Wilson suffering PTSD and choosing to prematurely end his career.

Since then, though, Wilson had voluntarily put himself into situations far worse than anything he'd faced in his military career and come through all right. Which would seem to lend credence to the rumours about Riley, which in turn made Rhodey wonder about Wilson's sexuality. Wonder if the younger man would be interested in being more than just team-mates, because *hot damn* but he was gorgeous, a little taller than Rhodey himself, his hair clipped short, a neatly trimmed moustache and goatee adorning a very handsome face. Dark brown eyes very wide, his full lips parted as he stared at Rhodey in amazement.

"Cat got your tongue?" Rhodey said with a grin. "I mean, I know the War Machine thing is pretty intimidating, but..."

“Do you, um, do you happen to have two sets of soulmark words, sir?” Sam said almost shyly.

Rhodey blinked. “Yes...”

Sam pulled his jacket off. Peeled up the T-shirt he was wearing underneath and showed a row of neatly printed words on his ribs. *I’ve heard a lot about you, Wilson.*

“Oh,” it was Steve who spoke as Rhodey just stood with his mouth hanging wide open. “*Oh*. I didn’t know you were, um, yeah, right, I’m outta here,” and Captain America fled, red-cheeked.

“I’m not gay, I’m bisexual!” Sam called after him cheerfully. “I don’t suppose you’ve already found our third?” he asked Rhodey hopefully.

“Fraid not,” Rhodey couldn’t resist moving a little closer, reaching out to touch his words. “She’s a cheeky madam, though, I know that.”

“I like a bit of sass,” Sam agreed, his eyes darkening as his soulmate’s fingers ghosted over his skin. Both silent for a moment, they stared at each other until Sam licked his lips, and then Rhodey groaned and stepped closer again, reaching up for Sam’s mouth.

They were kissing hungrily, arms wrapped around each other, when a cheerful female voice close by said “Holy crap, Jane, wouldja look at that? Now *that’s* what I call a *view*!”

“Darcy, you know I’m convinced the reason why you’re always disappointed in love is that you *always ogle gay men*,” Jane replied dryly. “Your gaydar isn’t just bad, it’s operating *in reverse*.”

“But they’re so *pretty*,” Darcy said, eyes ravenously devouring the two gorgeous guys snogging in front of her. Although they’d stopped now and were staring at her from two quite obnoxiously gorgeous faces. The uniformed one was older by a few years, she guessed, but not so old he couldn’t very satisfactorily satisfy her kink for a handsome officer. And the other one had the kind of facial hair that fuelled her happy dreams. “Hel-lo sex gods,” she said salaciously, “don’t suppose you swing both ways?”

They both looked stunned for an instant, and then the older one spoke. “For you, sweetheart, we’ll swing any which way you like.”

“Hells yeah,” the younger one agreed.

Darcy was only shocked for a second, and then she practically leaped on them, throwing herself into their welcoming arms, shrieking with happiness. “Oh my god, I found you, I found you, and you’re both *smokin’*!”

Jane just stood with her mouth open, watching, until Darcy turned back to her grinning. “These two gorgeous specimens of manhood? *They’re* why I always like to stop and stare at two guys making out.”

“What the hell are the odds of all three members of a triad meeting for the first time within five minutes?” Sam shook his head incredulously, still barely able to believe his luck.

“Well, considering that completed triads only make up about four point one per cent of all soulmate groupings, the probability...” Jane’s automatic math-solving trailed off as she realised the three of them were completely absorbed in each other. Smiling ruefully, she turned and quietly exited, leaving them alone.

### **\*Chapter 13\*: Not That Kind Of Scientist (Jane/Logan)**

It was like poetry in motion, Jane always thought. She'd found that coming down here to the Avengers' training room and watching them spar was therapeutic, often helping her brain to unblock whatever knotty math equation was holding up her research.

Of course, the eye candy never hurt. And was why Darcy was always willing to keep her company, usually with snacks.

"The new guy's gonna be here today," Darcy said, in between crunches from her bag of kettle chips. "Sam says he's *badass*."

"Um," Jane said thoughtfully in response, taking a handful of chips and absently crunching as she watched Rhodey kicking Pietro's ass on the other side of the shimmering force screens. Without being allowed to use his super-speed in training bouts, Rhodey's experience was most definitely telling. She winced in sympathy as the blond hit the mat face-first.

"War Machine *rocks*!" Darcy yelled with a fist-pump.

Rhodey glanced across at his soulmate and grinned, giving her a thumbs-up before offering a hand to help Pietro up. The younger man stood and smiled, conceding his defeat with good grace.

"I let you win, of course," Pietro said with a wink to Darcy, "couldn't let you lose face in front of your soulmate."

"You just keep telling yourself that, son," Rhodey snorted disdainfully.

The door to the training room opened to admit Steve and Sam, accompanied by a tall, stockily built man who Jane guessed must be 'the new guy'. She really hadn't heard anything about anyone new, but then she'd been buried in tests for the last week, only taking time out to eat or sleep when Darcy made her – or asked one of her soulmates to forcibly remove Jane from the labs when she got to be too impossible.

"So," Jane leant towards Darcy, "who's this new guy, then?"

"You totally weren't listening when I told you about him yesterday, were you?" Darcy threw her an exasperated glance, and Jane grinned guiltily. "His name's Logan. Apparently Steve knew him way back in the war, but he was called James then. Only he doesn't remember because apparently he fell afoul of some mad scientist types who erased his memory."

"And... made him immortal?" Jane guessed, because there was *no way* the very fine specimen of manhood currently stripping his shirt off and stepping into the ring looked old enough to have fought in World War Two.

"Logan doesn't know. He doesn't really remember anything but little bits from before a few years ago. Steve says he hasn't aged at all, though."

"Wow," Jane said, drinking in the sight of Logan's muscles. He was about Steve's height, dark-haired to Steve's blond, a thick mat of dark hair on his chest, which really was as muscled as Steve's. Dressed in only black tactical pants and boots, he looked like he belonged on a Sexy Mercenary calendar. "And apart from not aging, what's his specialty?" Steve was carrying his shield, so it had to be something pretty scary.

"I don't know," Darcy confessed, "except Sam said he heals up real quick – *argh*!"

Both girls screamed at the same time as three long blades *snicked* out from each of Logan's hands.

Logan whirled, his eyes instinctively seeking the source of the feminine shrieks. Seeing

the two women wide-eyed behind the force screen, he straightened up from the defensive crouch he'd entered, let his claws retract with a sheepish grin.

"Sorry," he said to Steve, "automatic reaction when I hear a woman scream is to find the source of distress..."

"They have a saying for it today, *chivalry is not dead*," Steve clapped him on the shoulder with a grin. "I think you surprised the ladies. Come on, let's introduce you. JOCASTA, lower the screen, please."

The center's AI acknowledged softly and the force screen hummed down. Jane and Darcy had recovered from their shock but still looked rather nervous as Steve and Logan approached; Sam and Rhodey, picking up Darcy's emotions, were quick to come over as well, silently bolstering their soulmate.

"Sorry if Logan gave you a surprise, girls," Steve said with a warm smile. "Logan, this is Darcy Lewis, Rhodey and Sam's soulmate. And this is Dr. Jane Foster, one of the Avengers' Initiative's pre-eminent scientists..."

Jane saw Logan flinch as soon as Steve said her title, draw back even further as Steve described her as a scientist, and immediately thought of what Darcy had told her about Logan falling afoul of 'mad scientists'.

"I'm not that kind of scientist!" she said hurriedly.

"Oh no, indeed," Steve realised the problem, "Dr. Foster's an astrophysicist..."

A small smile had appeared on Logan's face, playing lightly around the corners of what Jane was a little shocked to find herself thinking of as a very kissable mouth. He took a step forward, holding his hand out, and she took it, unable to help from looking down to see if she could see any trace of those wickedly gleaming blades, any blood. But there was nothing, just smooth skin between his knuckles, a large strong hand that held hers carefully.

"I'm very glad to hear that," he rumbled in a voice that seemed to come right up from his boots, and Jane's eyes flew up to his, startled. Almost instantly she dropped them again, searching around his torso, although...

"It ain't visible right now," Logan growled, and Jane looked back up at him again, her pale cheeks colouring in a pretty blush, "and I'm thinkin' yours might be somewhere even more unmentionable, darlin'."

Sam was the first of the onlookers to get a clue, and he hastily grabbed the others and shoved them towards the door, ignoring Darcy's cries of "REALLY? Go Janey!"

Finally the door slammed and they were alone, and Logan reached for his belt, never taking his eyes from Jane's.

"It's all right, you don't have to – don't have to show me," Jane stammered, scarlet from her throat to her hairline now, fighting hard to keep her eyes on his. He smiled, showing even white teeth.

"Don't hafta, no. D'you wanna look?"

She did, oh she really, really did. Jane licked her lips and dropped her eyes. And there, on the front of his groin on the left side, right where it would correspond with the mark on her left ass cheek if they... well, if they behaved in the *animal* kind of manner she was thinking more about every minute, was her tiny chicken-scratch handwriting. *I'm not that kind of scientist*.

*Oh look, he goes commando*, a very unhelpful part of her brain pointed out. "I could show you mine too, if you like," she blurted.

He made a low noise that was *definitely* a growl, and about an eighth of a second later she

found herself lifted off her feet and shoved back against the wall, pinned between the hard surface and Logan's apparently even harder naked torso. Jane almost fainted with delight.

"Don't make me an offer like that just now," Logan snarled, "or we'll be bondin' right here on this floor."

He smelled *really* good, hot and musky and deliciously male. Jane's eyes just about rolled back in her head. "Okay," she agreed deliriously.

The growl was even louder this time. "*Not* okay. You deserve more. Better. Soft sheets and candlelight, not – not *ruttin'*."

"I like the sound of all of that," Jane moaned as his lips found her throat, sharp teeth nipping lightly. She tilted her head in a gesture of submission, exposing more of her neck to him. "Soft sheets and candlelight *and* rutting. Please."

Logan groaned, fighting hard for control. "You'd better tell me where your room is then, my Jane. Because I ain't inclined to deny you anything you want and my place is pretty bare-bones as yet."

"Third floor, apartment seventeen," she moaned as he licked at her earlobe. "I've even got candles."

An hour later, Jane giggled suddenly against Logan's chest. "We forgot to light the candles."

"So we did." He grinned, stroking her hair. "I could light them now and we could go for round two, if you like?"

Jane leaned up on one elbow and raised her eyebrows at him. "I think there's something badly wrong with your maths."

## **\*Chapter 14\*: Little Lost Sometimes (Ward/Wanda)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20MaxiWard%20copy\\_zps3v6xtlix.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20MaxiWard%20copy_zps3v6xtlix.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

It had been a long time since he'd been to a party like this one, Ward reflected, waving away a waiter with a tray of champagne glasses. Not since he'd been working for SHIELD in Paris. He swallowed a nostalgic sigh firmly and let his eyes scan the room slowly. But there was more than enough security here – he and his men weren't even allowed to bring in guns! – and while Ward could think of many reasons someone might want to murder his current employer, he doubted anyone would try all that hard tonight.

He heard Hammer's artificial, booming laugh behind him and fought down another sigh. *This is what I am reduced to. Playing intimidatory muscle for a buffoon.*

Ward didn't look at Hammer – a bodyguard's job was not to watch his principal, but for threats *to* his principal – and instead looked at the person Hammer was talking to. A beautiful woman – *what a surprise*, Ward thought sarcastically, Hammer rarely wasted his time on anyone else – with long, silky dark brown hair, green eyes and a melancholy cast to her lovely features. Wearing a long, slinky scarlet dress with a black lace overlay, she was facing Hammer with a faraway expression in her eyes, and Ward had the distinct impression that she wasn't listening to a word the buffoon said.

*Smart girl, not wasting brainpower on Hammer – but why is she standing there, then?*

Ward's eyes narrowed as Tony Stark approached, clearly bent on speaking to Hammer – and the dark-haired beauty turned, put her hand on his arm, said a few words very softly into Stark's ear, and Stark walked away without a word.

*What the fuck just happened?*

Ward would have bet quite a large amount of money that Stark would seek to confront, and almost certainly insult and provoke, Hammer tonight. He'd been counting on it. Waiting for his opportunity, to grab Stark's arm and usher him away, and as he did so, whisper in the billionaire's ear.

*Coulson's alive.*

Two words would well and truly set the cat among the pigeons. Stark wouldn't be able to resist following that up, and with his resources, he'd soon find out that Ward spoke the truth.

And this dark-haired beauty had just foiled his plan by redirecting Stark with only a couple of whispered words.

*How the hell did she do that? And why? Who is she?* Ward took a step forward, fully intent on finding out.

~~~~~

Wanda turned as she sensed someone approaching her with anger, directed at her. Her eyes made contact with those of a tall man a few steps away, a man with black hair and eyes of almost the same colour, an extraordinarily handsome face.

She would never like crowds. With so many people so close, it was impossible to block out all of their emotions, but it was important for her to learn to do so at need, Natasha insisted, and Wanda knew the spy was right. She was getting better at it, only the strongest emotions could break through – like the lust of the creep who'd been talking to her breasts – and the anger of the tall man.

And the murderous intent of the three men on the balcony above the crowd...

"Gun!" she screamed, pointing upwards, and the room was suddenly chaos.

Ward's three men were all closer to Hammer than he was, and they did the smart thing by flinging Hammer onto the ground and themselves on top of him so that their body armour would protect him.

Ward's ears registered a *spanging* sound. *That's Hawkeye's bowstring.* Okay, so the attackers are well taken care of... until the bullets started hailing down. Instinctively, he lunged forward, grabbed the dark-haired girl and bore her down to the ground. A sharp agony in the middle of his back made him grunt with pain, and then there was an even sharper pain in his left calf.

Wanda struggled to get out from under the man who'd flung her to the ground and shielded her with his body even as she summoned her magic.

"Don't move," he grunted at her, his mind bright with pain.

"You're hurt," she whispered, staring into his eyes as the gunfire fell silent. A small hand came up, touched his cheek with almost unbearable tenderness, and Ward found himself stilling, staring back into her green eyes as they began to glow orange-red.

"Who are you?" he gasped out, hardly daring to believe.

"Do you not know me, Grant Ward? I am your soulmate." Her smile was breathtaking, her accent sultry, *south-eastern Europe somewhere*, he thought, his mind automatically processing the input, *the Balkans perhaps...*

For a long moment he stared down at her, and then he groaned out, “Where have you *been?*”

“I’m sorry,” her fingers traced along his cheekbone gently. “Sorry I took so long to find you. But would I be your soulmate if I had not suffered, too? If I had not made decisions that I thought were the right way, only to find out that they led to consequences awful beyond my imagining? If anyone can understand the depth of your regret, I can.”

He knew, then, who she was. Who she had to be. Wanda Maximoff, the Scarlet Witch – one of the new Avengers. She’d been adept so far at keeping her face out of photographs, but considering the red glow in her irises, there was no one else she could be. Nor could he deny the truth of her words, considering what he knew about her.

“I can take away your pain, if you wish it,” Wanda offered quietly.

“Would I still be *your* soulmate, if I did not feel it?” Ward asked her in return. “If I did not understand your suffering, your regrets?”

Her eyes faded back to a soft green then and she smiled up at him. “Shall we go forward then together, Grant? Make amends for the suffering we have caused to others?”

He hesitated, the desire for personal vengeance for his suffering still seething in his heart. “I’ve done some pretty terrible things.”

“I lost my twin brother and half my country to my poor choices, Grant. Choices I made when I desired only revenge for my own suffering. That road leads only to more pain. Let it go, set it aside. There are greater wrongs in this world, greater causes for us to fight for than our personal vendettas.”

She was fourteen years his junior. But her eyes were a hundred years old in pain and loss as she looked up at him, and in that moment, Grant Ward made his decision.

The gunfire had long since fallen silent, people standing and dusting themselves off, looking around warily. Ward pushed himself to his feet with a pained grunt, feeling the blood coursing down the back of his leg.

“What do you need me to do?”

“You’re hurt...” she reached out to him.

“I’ll live. Tell me what you need me to do, Wanda.”

“Come with me,” she held out her hand, and he took it, followed her out of the hall without a backward glance.

“Where are we going? South America – I have a drop box a few blocks from here, I can pick up cash and ID, get one for you...”

Wanda turned to look up at him. Her head barely reached his shoulder. “No more running, Grant. That’s not how you wipe out the red in your ledger.”

His head spun. “Are you – telling me to turn myself in? To SHIELD?” He *couldn’t* go back to that vault, that terrible place of darkness where all he had to do was dwell on his past mistakes. Not again.

“No.” Wanda shook her head. “Not unless that’s what you think you ought to do.”

“I don’t understand, then. What do you want me to do?”

“The Avengers aren’t beholden to SHIELD. Nor are all of our identities public. They don’t ever have to know that you’re with us.”

“Romanoff knows me. So does Barton.”

“They’ve both followed the path you’re setting your feet on now, Grant. They’ll understand.”

He hesitated only a moment before nodding. "I'm not much good for anything but fighting and killing."

"Then you and Natasha should get on very well. She feels the same way."

He managed a small smile at that. He was beginning to feel a little dizzy, the blood running down his calf pooling in his shoe. "I think..." the world spun. The last thing he heard was Wanda's frightened scream.

Ward woke to a bright, sunlit room, the feel of small, slender fingers wrapped around his. Looking down, he discovered he was in a large, comfortable bed – and Wanda was curled up asleep on a chair beside it, her cheek on the bed, her hand outstretched to hold his.

"So you're awake," a voice said, and his head snapped back the other way.

Romanoff.

"Are you here to kill me?"

"No," the redhead responded, though she cocked her head consideringly. "I thought about it. When Hill told me that you called me eye candy."

"I was trying to piss her off," Ward tried to excuse himself.

"Of course you were." Romanoff smiled, showing teeth, and Ward had to order himself sternly not to cower. "I'm not going to kill you. Not at the moment. You might wish I had once you start training, though."

"Training for what?" Ward called after her as she exited the room, the door closing behind her.

"Training to be an Avenger, of course," Wanda said softly, and he looked down to see his soulmate gazing at him, a smile on her soft lips, her green eyes shining. "What else?"

***Chapter 15*: You Came Back (Darcy/Sabretooth)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/Tasertooth_zpsa8tuo6ln.jpg-REPLACE_ME

Kidnapped. Again. What even is my life? Darcy whined mentally... and a little bit verbally as the black-clad man carrying her banged her knee on the wall turning a corner.

"Hey, watch it, buster!" she said weakly. Her leg hurt like hell: she didn't think it was broken, but it had twisted horribly as she fell down a flight of stairs running for the safe room Stark had built under their super-duper new astronomical observatory and she'd felt something snap inside her knee with a white-hot spear of agony. *Ligament or tendon*, she thought gloomily. She'd screamed at Jane, standing at the door of the safe room, to get inside just as the men came clattering down the stairs, saw the agony and indecision on Jane's face as Erik slammed the door shut.

Darcy had blacked out with the pain in her leg as she tried to get up. Came to trussed up like a turkey in the back of a van... but there were only black-clad men around her, muttering in a guttural language she didn't recognise, and they sounded *pissed*, so Darcy hoped that meant Jane and Erik were safe.

The man carrying her only snorted and kept walking, but he didn't bang her leg again, so Darcy figured she'd call it a win. She sank back into her pain-filled haze, only coming back to alertness when she heard the clang of a heavy steel door.

It was a cell block, and a crude one, basically just rows of heavy steel bars set into concrete top and bottom, welded with cross-braces vertically every foot or so. At first Darcy thought there was no one else there, but as one of the cages was unlocked and she was plonked unceremoniously down on a thin mattress inside, she saw that there was a... *thing* in the next cage. Shaggy-haired, unkempt, it twisted around and stared at her, and she flinched back as she realised it was a man, dressed in rags, his eyes gleaming with a feral light. And then he opened his mouth to speak to the guards and she flinched back at the sight of his too-sharp, gleaming white canine teeth.

“Раз уж вы принесли мне этот лакомый кусочек, могли бы посадить её ко мне,” Victor growled.

“Мечтать не вредно, мутант!” the men laughed crudely and left, slamming the cell door behind them.

Victor looked curiously at his new prison companion. Young and very pretty, a toothsome bit indeed with a lush figure and... very, very frightened deep blue eyes.

He wasn't a man for gentleness. If he'd ever known how, he'd long since forgotten. But he tried to be kind, to ease that terror in her eyes.

“I don't *actually* eat human flesh,” he growled.

Darcy managed, somehow, to suppress a scream. *No. No. This is a nightmare. That – that* beast-man *did not just say* that. She clutched at her leg and said nothing.

Victor growled slightly to himself. “Do you understand me? You speak English?” She looked Western, considering her clothes, and he was pretty sure they were still in the Americas somewhere, although their captors were Kazakhstani.

If I don't speak, he'll never know. Darcy nodded slowly. She'd seen a movie once where the heroine pulled off this trick after finding out a villain was her soulmate... she put her tongue out, tapped it and shook her head.

“You're mute? Damn. I don't speak ASL.”

She blinked, surprised that he sounded annoyed about that. Made some vaguely sign-language-ish signs with her hands and shrugged her shoulders, as though to indicate, *it doesn't matter.*

“I'm Victor. Victor Creed.” He sniffed the air, stared hard at her. “You're hurt. I can smell your pain.”

You can WHAT? Darcy had been rethinking her decision to pretend she was mute when he spoke quite pleasantly, hastily changed her mind yet again now. She pointed at her knee, mimed wrenching it.

“Huh. Nuthin' I can do for that.” He paced his cell, growling to himself, didn't speak to her again.

It was a few hours later when the cell block's outer door opened again and two of the Kazakhs came back in. They each had a plastic cup of water and a bowl of soup, pushed them one at a time through the bars of the cells, the one at Victor's cell keeping a wary eye on him.

“The girl's hurt,” Victor growled at them in Russian. “She can't walk. Get her some bandages for her leg and some fucking painkillers.”

“You don't give the orders around here, mutant!” was his only reply, and then they left again.

Victor sighed. Looked at the girl, who was looking at the bowl and cup. “D'you think you can get over there?” he asked.

Darcy considered. Eventually, she pushed herself slowly off the mattress and tried to ease across the floor. The slightest movement was agony on her leg, though, and she stilled, tears pricking at her eyes.

“Okay. Stay there.” Victor considered the problem. The bowl and cup in her cell was way too far away for him to reach. He sighed. He could go without food and water for a long time, but in her weakened state, this girl wouldn’t last long. Picking up his own bowl and cup, he moved as close to her as he could and pushed them through the bars. They ended up less than a foot from her hand.

Darcy stared incredulously as Victor gave her his own portion. She shook her head and tried to push them back at him, provoking an absolutely terrifying growl. Petrified, she grabbed the cup and took a sip of the flat, faintly metallic-tasting water inside.

Victor nodded approvingly. Watched as the girl drank the water and ate the soup. She peered at him cautiously occasionally, still clearly terrified of him. At last she set the bowl down, tilted it to show him it was empty. He smiled, not showing his teeth.

“Good girl. You’ll need your strength.”

She stared at him for a few long moments, and then she put her finger to the cell floor and started moving it in the dust. Writing something.

DARCY

“Darcy? That’s your name?”

She nodded and gave him a small smile. He nodded slowly.

“Well, it’s nice to meet you, Darcy.”

Exhausted and frightened, Darcy watched for a little while as Victor paced his cell. He moved, she thought, more like a caged animal than a man, like a lion she’d seen once on a documentary about the world’s worst zoos, silently pacing its territory, waiting for the opportunity to strike. Untameable.

Cold, she huddled on the mattress. There was no blanket, and the mattress was thin enough that the chill from the concrete floor seeped through the thin foam. There was no way to get warm, but eventually her pain and weariness overcame her consciousness and her senses slipped away.

Victor paused in his pacing, stared at Darcy. Her breathing had slowed, indicating sleep, but... she was shivering, and he suspected her state was closer to unconsciousness than sleep. Those bastards, didn’t even give her a blanket. Why was she even here? She had some value as a hostage, a negotiating chip, he guessed. Well, she’d have no value to their captors if she died. No skin off his nose.

Except... there was some instinct deep inside him that couldn’t let it happen. Not if he could do something to prevent it. With a deep sigh that might have sounded something like a growl, Victor knelt and reached through the bars to grab the edge of the mattress.

Darcy woke feeling surprisingly warm. Blinking her eyes slowly open as consciousness returned, she became slowly aware that there was something tight around her aching knee, and something very warm against her back, and even warmer over her stomach.

“Don’t be alarmed, now,” a gruff voice said very close to her ear. “Just didn’t want ya to freeze to death.”

She froze, and the very warm thing over her stomach moved away, revealing itself to be a man’s bare, muscular arm.

Slowly, she turned over, looked at him. She was lying up against the bars of the cage, and

the shirt he'd been wearing slid away; he'd placed it between her back and the bars, then pressed himself up against the bars and held her, doing his best to share his body heat.

His eyes were a stormy grey-blue as he looked at her. They stared at each other in silence for a few moments before a sudden sound had Victor leaping to his feet, fingers curled into claws.

The guards were back. They looked at Darcy's untouched cup and bowl, snapped at Victor in Russian. He snapped back, his tone derisive, pointed at Darcy's leg. She looked down at it, wondering what the tight thing around her knee was, discovered it to be a strip of fabric she suspected he'd torn off his shirt.

There was more surly snarling in Russian and then the guards went away. To Darcy's enormous surprise, they returned a few minutes later with a blanket and some actual bandages, and one of them unlocked her cell and came in. Warily eyeing Victor, he grabbed the edge of her mattress and dragged it away from Victor's cell before crouching down to bandage Darcy's knee properly.

The other guard, who'd remained outside the cell, laughed and said something that Darcy suspected was crude from the tone, not to mention the suggestive gesture that accompanied the remark. The guard bandaging Darcy's knee looked at her breasts and started to smile.

Until Victor snarled.

The sound was *horrifying*, and both guards lurched back, faces paling. The one bandaging Darcy's leg snatched his hands away as though burned, they both glanced at each other – and then they fled, the cell door slamming behind them.

You are a very, very scary... thing. Darcy stared at Victor for a moment, and he stared back, before turning his back and starting to pace again. She looked down at her half-banded leg, sighed and took up the task herself.

"You're not pulling it tight enough," Victor growled after a moment. "Come here."

She hesitated before shuffling off the mattress and over to the bars. He reached through them and pulled the bandage a whole lot tighter, supporting her knee properly, and for the first time Darcy noticed that his fingers were *clawed*.

Don't scream don't speak just keep your mouth shut, Darcy...

She looked up at Victor once he'd finished tying the bandage tight, and he smiled at her, keeping his lips together to hide those horrifyingly sharp canine teeth, she realised. "You'll need an operation, maybe, once you're out of here," he said quietly. "But hopefully that will keep you together in the meantime."

She managed a small smile and a nod in return, and he went back to his pacing.

The guards were back in half an hour, this time with another man who Darcy hadn't seen before. He stepped up to Victor's cage and there was a lot of snarly Russian. She just sat quietly and watched, wondering what was going on, until the Important Bad Guy got just a little too heated and a little too close.

Darcy blinked and nearly missed it. Victor moved *waaaay* too fast, suddenly Important Bad Guy's neck was spouting blood, and the cell keys that had been hanging on his belt were in Victor's hand.

The other two guards pulled out their guns and started shooting, and Darcy immediately stopped watching and curled up into the tiniest little ball she could manage, praying she didn't get hit by any ricochets. There was a screech, snarling noises, more gunfire, screaming... and everything went quiet.

Slowly and very cautiously, Darcy lifted her head.

There was no sign of Victor. His cage door swung open, there were three very dead bodies on the ground, and more blood than Darcy had ever seen in her life. She looked away and tried not to vomit.

He just left me here, one part of her brain whispered.

Good! the more sensible part declared. *Let's just hope he makes enough racket leaving that the authorities come to check the place out.*

She stayed there for what seemed like forever, resolutely keeping her eyes away from the bodies and the blood.

What if no one comes? she thought suddenly. *Oh God I'm going to end up gnawing on dead bodies to survive...*

The outer cell block door creaked as it swung open, and Darcy looked up – into Victor's eyes.

He'd changed his clothes, into some of the guards' black commando gear, and washed his hands, made an effort to wash the blood off his face too. She still looked at him as though he was a monster, and Victor sighed, reaching out to unlock her cell door.

"Sorry I took a while. Wanted to make sure the place was safe before I came back for you, and then I was, well, kind of messy. Didn't want to give you nightmares."

Darcy blinked in astonishment as he came into the cell, stooped to pick her up and cradle her gently in his arms.

"You came back for me," she whispered wonderingly.

Victor's stride towards the door stuttered. He looked down at Darcy, his grey eyes wide, before resuming. "Had to, didn't I? I was never gonna find my soulmate if I got in the habit of leaving people behind." His arms tightened around her protectively. "Wouldn't ever leave *you* behind, Darcy. Not ever."

She let her head rest on his shoulder, oddly soothed by the musky, animal scent that rose from his skin. Her leg still hurt appallingly, and she felt horribly nauseous, but somehow, she was quite confident that everything was going to be fine.

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Darcy woke in a hospital bed, with Jane asleep in a chair beside her. For a few moments she thought that it had all been a dream, until she looked beyond Jane and saw Victor outside in the corridor.

Pacing.

She drifted back to sleep with a small smile on her face. Victor was standing guard outside her room, pacing.

Everything was just perfect.

## **\*Chapter 16\*: A Score To Settle (Rumlow/Gambit)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/Rumbit\\_zpsod0itogb.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/Rumbit_zpsod0itogb.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Remy hummed softly under his breath as he expertly picked the lock. This was his

favourite kind of job, being paid to steal from a man he'd gladly have robbed blind for free. Disabling the alarm before he opened the door, he slid inside, a silent shadow, darted quietly through the darkened house. The owner was out at a dinner – one being given by Remy's current employer. The house was all Remy's. He came to the door he was looking for, opened it and slid inside – and came face to face with the barrel of a pistol.

“*Merde.*”

Brock Rumlow blinked with shock. It was all the time the other man needed, apparently, to lash out and grab the pistol barrel, moving ridiculously quickly. Brock had a few surprises up his own sleeve, though, and moved just as fast to kick the intruder in the kneecap.

The intruder twisted lithely away from the strike, tried to use Brock's grip on the gun to pull him forward – he'd likely try and snap Brock's elbow inside out if he did – so Brock feinted, let him pull him forward part-way as if he was going to fall for the move, before letting go of the gun and using his built-up momentum to get in a strike to the solar-plexus.

Remy could hardly believe how fast the other man moved, fast as a striking snake and deft, obviously superbly trained in the most brutal fighting techniques. The hit to his chest was hard enough to have sent any normal man flying.

But Remy LeBeau was no ordinary man, and he'd had *quite* enough of this shit. “Not today, *cafard*,” he snapped, swept the guard off his feet with a superbly placed leg strike when the other man was still waiting for him to go down from the chest hit, and an instant later had his hand poised to strike, violet light glowing around it. In the light of his magic, he finally got a good look at the other man's face. *Wow*, hot stuff, dark Italianate good looks, heavy-lidded eyes, a mouth made for sin, heavy black stubble that Remy would just love to feel against his skin.

“It would be a shame to kill you, handsome,” he growled. “So just lie still and I won't have to fuck up that pretty face, either.”

“Be a real shame if you had to do either,” Brock quipped.

The violet light blinked out, but not before he saw the utter shock in the other man's expression. An instant later he'd twisted and flipped, reversing their positions, sitting up on the intruder's stomach, a second gun pointed at his face.

“I'm thinking that you're just about as shocked as I am right now. So let's start again. Hi. I'm Brock Rumlow, and I think I'm your soulmate?”

The intruder stared at him for a moment and then smiled slowly, making a seriously attractive face look even more handsome. “*Mon plaisir*. I am Remy – Remy LeBeau.”

“The thief,” Brock nodded slowly.

“You were expecting me, then? Ah, the perils of accepting jobs from those amoral enough to pay a thief. He sold me out, my employer?”

“For a good deal of money,” Brock agreed. “Plus enough to pay me to apprehend you – *alive*. My employer wants you rather badly to pay out so much, wouldn't you agree?”

“Oui. So, *mon âme soeur*,” Remy folded his hands behind his head and relaxed, quite at his ease despite the gun Brock still had pointing at his face, “shall we figure out how to collect on all that lovely money together? Or shall we ah, *pleasure* ourselves first,” his eyes cut downwards towards Brock's groin, “and plot our sweet revenge later?”

The Cajun was gorgeous, and his accent was doing extremely good things to Brock's insides. His cock hardened, and Remy grinned shamelessly up at him, rocked his hips so Brock could feel his own arousal.

“Do you have two marks?” he checked first. He really didn't want to end up the plot of a

bad horror movie.

“*Oui. Et tu?* Do you know our third?” Remy looked hopeful, and Brock blinked with a sudden realisation. He was born with the word *Merde* on his ribs. Remy was older than him, though he looked a good deal younger.

“I’m afraid not,” he admitted. Sheathed his gun and pulled up his shirt to show the words on his stomach. *You’re not who I expected.*

“You’re sitting on my second set,” Remy wiggled his hips suggestively, and Brock moved back to pull up the Cajun’s shirt, look at the matching scribble. *Why didn’t that work? That always works normally! It worked on a freaking god, so what are you?*

Brock couldn’t help but grin. “Well, she’s more of a chatty Cathy than I’d always thought. She sounds like fun.”

“I’m dying to meet her.” Remy’s eyes dropped to his groin again, and he licked his lips meaningfully. “Been very much looking forward to meeting you too.”

He had a gorgeous mouth, soft pink lips, and Brock lost it, leaning forward to kiss him hungrily. Remy lost no time kissing him back, pulling his hands from behind his head and slipping his arms around Brock’s neck, rocking his hips as Brock ground against him. The kiss was ferocious, all teeth and tongues, Brock’s stubble rasping against Remy’s own.

The sound of a door slamming elsewhere in the house made both of them freeze. Brock jerked his head up, met Remy’s eyes.

Remy sighed. “Business first, pleasure later, *mon cœur?*”

“Definitely.” Brock stood, retrieved his other gun. Offered it to Remy, who he was pretty sure was unarmed. The Cajun grinned as he got to his feet.

“*Non, merci.* I have weapons enough.” He slipped a pack of playing cards from his coat pocket, fanned them between his fingers, smirked at Brock’s puzzled expression. “You’ll see. Now come. I have a score to settle.”

French translations

*Merde* – shit

*Cochon* – pig

*Mon plaisir* – my pleasure

*mon âme soeur* – my soul mate

*Oui. Et tu?* – Yes. And you?

*mon cœur* – my heart

## **\*Chapter 17\*: Not Really Supervillains (Rumlow/Gambit/Darcy)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/TaserRumbit\\_zpsk7ildabw.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/TaserRumbit_zpsk7ildabw.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Brock and Remy made a brilliant team. Brock had a better head for figures than Remy, and with his firm hand, money no longer ran quite so freely through Remy’s fingers. He was also a better planner, from his years of experience managing STRIKE missions before he quit HYDRA in disgust, when they abandoned him after the fall of the Triskelion. He’d been a mercenary ever since.

Being a thief, Brock was finding, actually paid a hell of a lot more for a lot less risk. Particularly since they were usually hired to steal one specific item, and their employers really didn't give a damn if they helped themselves to one or two minor valuables on their way out. Remy could find a buyer for just about anything, it seemed, and within a few months they were flush enough with cash that they could afford to be extremely picky about the jobs they accepted.

So when they were asked to steal something from Tony Stark, their first reaction was *oh hell no*.

"Too hard a target," Brock told Justin Hammer flatly. "Avengers Tower? You're kidding."

"You're saying that you couldn't do it?" Hammer said craftily.

"I'm saying that we *ain't* doing it. Not for the money you're offering."

"You told me it was a standard fee!"

"For a standard job, yeah. But this is so far from being a standard job it's laughable. You're asking us to break into one of the most secure buildings in the world, occupied by superheroes who would just love the opportunity to kick our asses, and steal the blueprints for the Stark arc reactor!"

"It would certainly be a challenge, *mon cœur*," Remy said thoughtfully.

"Do not start," Brock shot him a warning glance. Remy grinned in return, pulled a pack of cards from his coat pocket and began shuffling them deftly.

"Double your fee," Hammer said.

"No." Brock shrugged when Hammer looked at him. "It's too risky."

"*Où est ton esprit d'aventure?*" Remy murmured.

Brock shot his soulmate a fulminating glare. "*NO*."

"Perhaps Monsieur LeBeau would be interested in the job without you?" Hammer said slyly. "Since it seems you lack the..." he was about to say *balls*, but a glance into Rumlow's hard eyes made him change his mind "... desire to try your skills with such an ambitious challenge."

"Twenty million dollars," Remy said coolly when Brock just glared.

"Twenty... that's *outrageous*!" Hammer's jaw dropped.

"You just spent four years in prison for attempting to rip off Mr Stark's designs, Mr Hammer," Remy raised a lazy eyebrow. "My soulmate and I, we 'ave no desire to suffer the same fate. If Stark finds out we did this thing, he will come after us. We'll need the money to make sure we don't get caught."

"How much will you make from the designs you can create with those blueprints, Mr Hammer?" Brock cut in. "A billion? Two? Twenty million is small change in comparison, and you know it."

Hammer blustered for a little while, and then he caved. Remy and Brock convinced him to pay two million up front – they'd have a lot of setup costs on this one – and then intimidated him a bit to make sure he didn't even think about ripping them off. That was laughably easy. The man apparently had the spine of a jellyfish.

It wouldn't be easy, of course. It would take a *lot* of planning. Bribes, blackmail, working with a few talented hackers Remy and Brock dug up who were delighted to be given a chance at Stark's systems *and* get paid for it if they succeeded.

And then there was the question of timing. They couldn't pick a moment in advance, because the only time when they'd have a hope in hell of pulling this thing off was when the Avengers were out of the Tower. So they could plan and prepare, plan and prepare, and then they'd have to wait who knows how long for their opportunity.

After a month, Hammer started getting antsy. Brock rolled his eyes and terrified him into silence. Two weeks later he was back. Remy produced a bottle of bourbon and a pack of cards and took the idiot for everything he had on him.

Three days after that, the Avengers were called out to deal with, apparently, the Loch Ness Monster, according to news reports. Remy and Brock didn't waste time on incredulity. They just grabbed their gear and headed out.

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Darcy hummed softly to herself as she headed back to the lab to collect her iPod. She'd had her hands full with a semi-conscious Jane when she left a little while earlier to haul her over-tired scientist off to her bed, had failed to grab it. But she wanted her tunes to go to sleep, and...

... hadn't JARVIS automatically switched off the lights behind her when she left? The Tower's arc reactor meant they didn't have an energy bill issue, but Pepper had long since convinced Tony to provide any excess to the city grid and Darcy was always conscious of power usage...

... oh, there was someone sitting at Jane's computer terminal, a man with short dark hair. Too tall to be Tony. Had to be Bruce. Huh, were the team back already? Darcy hadn't heard the jet land. She walked into the lab, the hissing of the doors as they slid open making the dark-haired man spin around.

"Oh, *shit*," he said.

"You're not who I expected," Darcy said to the unfamiliar, handsome face, hastily scrabbling at the Taser holstered at the small of her back. She'd got used to carrying it now. Considering how often the Tower was attacked by villains, or some idiot tried to kidnap Jane...

Dark eyes widened, startled, and then Darkly Handsome Villain said; "Remy, no!"

Movement in the corner of her eye alerted Darcy, and she flung out her hand and activated the Taser in it, watched as the two pins struck the other man, who'd been creeping silently up to grab her, in the throat. Ooh, that was gonna *hurt*...

... why wasn't he going down? The cartridge had worked, she could actually *see* the sparks of electricity racing up the wires...

"Why didn't that work? That always works normally! It worked on a freaking *god*, so what are *you*?" Unreasonably annoyed, she threw the useless Taser at him.

Cheaty Superhuman grinned at her, fending the makeshift weapon off so it clattered harmlessly to the floor. "Sorry, *chère*. You picked the wrong target."

"What?" Darcy froze. He was making no move towards her, just plucking the pins from his throat and tossing them casually aside. She stared at him. At his ridiculously handsome face, wavy brown hair, tall muscular build. Turned her head to look at Darkly Handsome Villain, who'd stood up and was walking slowly towards her.

"Oh, *shit*."

"That's what I said. Sorry for the swear word."

"I... think I need to sit down," Darcy said a bit weakly, and Cheaty Superhuman moved – waaay too fast, okay, *questions* needed to be asked once she didn't feel like her brain was about to explode with the enormity of what had just happened – and suddenly she was sitting down in Jane's office chair with both of them towering over her.

"Okay," she blinked up at them, looking from one stupidly handsome face to the other.

“So in looks terms clearly I just won the soulmate lottery, but please God tell me you’re not really supervillains.”

“We’re not really supervillains,” they both chorused.

“Yes but are you just *saying* that? Mind you, all the supervillains I’ve met would probably be offended about having to lie about it, they seem to take pride in being all MWAHAHAH. Right, so you’re just regular run-of-the-mill bad guys, then? I could probably work with that.”

“Not even that,” Darkly Handsome went to one knee by her chair. “We’re mercenaries – mercenary thieves, to be exact. I’m Brock, Brock Rumlow, and he’s Remy LeBeau.”

“*Enchanté*,” Remy murmured, reaching for her hand and lifting it to his lips as he too went to one knee.

“And now I think I’m going to make like a Regency heroine and have a bit of a swoon because YOU TWO.”

They were both laughing at her silently, she could see it in the dimple flashing in Brock’s stubbled cheek (a fucking *dimple*, WHAT EVEN) and the way Remy’s full lips were twitching at the corners. Darcy took several deep breaths – oohh, that was a bad idea, at least one of them was wearing *really nice* cologne.

“Well, I’m Darcy Lewis, since we’re doing introductions. So. Mercenaries. You going to tell me why you’re here in Avengers Tower, which seriously has to be one of the world’s toughest targets? I really don’t think you’re here just for kicks.”

“Justin Hammer hired us to steal the blueprints for the Stark arc reactor,” Remy said. Brock shot him an incredulous glance and Remy shrugged. “*Mon cœur*, all plans flew out the window when she spoke our words, and you know it. I’m not going to start off our relationship with our soulmate by lying to her.”

She could have listened to Remy talk all day. Brock was similarly affected, she could tell. At last he shrugged. “Yeah. What he said. Hammer’s a prick but he pays fucking well.”

“Hmm,” Darcy glanced from one to the other of them, her eyes gleaming as she suddenly came up with an utterly wonderful idea. “Agreed on Hammer. He groped me once.”

“He *what*.” Brock’s eyes darkened, and she saw Remy’s jaw clench.

“Grabbed my boob. Right in the middle of a swanky party Stark dragged me to as his plus-one when Pepper was out of the country somewhere.”

“Which hand?”

“Er, right, I think?” she blinked at Brock’s odd question. “Why?”

“Just checking which hand I need to cut off.”

She was... fairly sure he was serious. “Ah, I see, you’re the vicious one.”

“*Non, chère*,” Remy drawled. “I plan to chop off something Hammer will miss a lot more than his hand.”

“Okay, okay, whoah,” Darcy waved her hands. “I told you about that to incentivise you into going along with *my* evil plan. Because I plan to hit him where it *really* hurts. His wallet.”

“I like her,” Remy said to Brock.

“I should bloody well hope so too,” Brock responded, his eyes locked on Darcy’s. “Go on, sweetheart.”

“Tony will totally be up for it too. We’ll fake up the arc reactor plans. You take them to Hammer, pocket the money, and then Tony sues him for industrial espionage and we make it look like you were working for Tony all along. *Voilà*, lots of lovely money with which the three

of us could have a very nice holiday somewhere with lots of sun, sand, sea and sex.” *Dammit*, there were only supposed to be 3 S’s. But that last one had totally slipped out. They were so hot she couldn’t help but think about it, think about sweaty muscular bodies sliding against hers...

They both stared at her silently for so long that Darcy started to feel a bit worried.
“What?” she demanded.

“I fucking *adore* you,” Brock said reverently.

“*Moi, aussi*,” Remy agreed.

French translations:

mon cœur – my heart

Où est ton esprit d'aventure? – where’s your spirit of adventure?

Enchanté – (I am) enchanted

Moi, aussi – me, too

***Chapter 18*: A Terrible Chaperone (Gambit/Wanda)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20ScarletGambit_zpsprnvhpf.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Who’s de tragic beauty, Clint?”

“Hm?” Clint turned to see Gambit standing behind him, a drink held negligently in the tall Cajun’s hand as he stared across the room. Any number of ‘allies’ had been invited to the official opening of the New Avengers Facility. Clint had put LeBeau’s name on the guest list himself. In fact he’d proposed that Remy be invited to join the Avengers, but Steve, on reading the file that Stark produced for him, vetoed the idea immediately.

“He’s a thief!” Steve said in scandalised tones, “for *hire*!”

“He only takes jobs stealing from bad people,” Clint pointed out reasonably.

“We’re *not* inviting mercenaries to join, Hawkeye.”

That had ended the conversation, for now, at least, though Clint still planned to get Remy to do a demonstration or two for the good Captain. He’d seen what Remy was capable of. Steve hadn’t.

Following Remy’s gaze across the room, Clint spotted who he was looking at. “Wanda? Leave her alone.”

Remy turned to look at the shorter man, brows raised. He’d rarely heard Clint speak in that tone, and never to him. The archer sounded – protective? “And does Laura know about your fondness for *la jolie fille*?”

“Laura will cut off your nuts herself if you break Wanda’s heart, and that’s if I don’t get to you first,” Clint responded sharply.

“She looks as though her heart has been broken already, *la pauvre petite*.” Remy looked back at the stunning brunette in the blood-red dress, her long dark brown hair falling silkily to her waist, a stunning contrast to her creamy pale skin. She stood with a small group all talking animatedly together, but yet stood apart; her eyes far away as she played absently with a pendant hanging between her breasts. Silver rings glinted on her fingers as they moved in the light and Remy watched hypnotised, enthralled by her beauty, the air of tragedy that hung about her.

“Her twin brother died in Sokovia,” Clint said quietly. “They survived HYDRA’s torture

chambers together, among other trials.”

“Quicksilver!” Remy’s eyes widened. “But that makes her *La Sorcière Écarlate*, non?”

“*Oui*,” Clint agreed reluctantly.

“But I have been dying to meet her, Clint, she wields power that resembles mine... you cannot deny me the chance to talk to her!”

Remy was already moving, stepping forward eagerly, and Clint groaned under his breath. But he *couldn’t* deny Remy, not without making a scene, and he owed the other man too much for that.

“I’ll introduce you, then. But you keep that lethal Cajun charm under wraps.”

“*Impossible, mon ami*,” Remy chuckled softly as they wended through the crowd. “Remy cannot help being better looking than every other man in any given room.”

“Ugh, God, remind me why I’m friends with you again?”

“I cannot, both you and *La Veuve Noire* tell me I must not mention Budapest, and I fear her wrath if not yours,” Remy bantered back, making Clint laugh as the two of them approached Wanda.

Her eyes lit as she saw Clint coming and she managed a small smile for him. He slid an arm around her waist, bent his head to kiss her cheek.

“You look stunning, Wanda,” he said sincerely. “I want to introduce you to a friend of mine, Remy LeBeau. He exaggerates everything shamelessly so don’t believe a word he says.”

“You wound me, *mon ami*!” Remy shook his head before smiling at Wanda and sweeping her a flamboyant bow. “I need no exaggerations to praise your beauty, *mademoiselle*.”

She froze, her green eyes widening with what he thought might be distress. She took a small step backwards, turning her face up to Clint, who picked up on her agitation immediately.

“Wanda?” he queried. “Is something wrong?”

Her eyes flickered back to Remy, to Clint again. “*Mozemo li da razgovaramo negde nasamo?*” she asked Clint softly, her voice husky.

Remy frowned. “*Je suis désolé*, but did I say something wrong, Clint?” he asked, puzzled.

Wanda didn’t look at him. “Please take us somewhere private,” she said insistently to Clint. “Him too.”

Her voice was low and melodious, her accent seductive; a sudden wave of lust kicked Remy square in the groin and he had to pause to gather his composure before following Wanda and an extremely bemused-looking Clint from the room.

They ended up in an as-yet-empty administrative office, Clint closing the door behind them as the lights automatically came on. “What the hell is going on, Wanda?” he said irritably.

“I’m sorry, Clint, I... among my people, it is considered good fortune, if the man speaks first, for the woman to return her words in private, witnessed only by her closest male relative. If you will stand for me?”

It took Clint a moment to realise what she meant. His mouth dropped open, and then he gathered himself. “It would be my honour to stand for you,” he said quietly, realising that this moment had to be extremely emotional for her, so soon after Pietro’s loss. “Whatever you need me to do, honey. You know that.”

She pressed lightly on his hand, her green eyes luminous with unshed tears, before turning to Remy, who had also finally bought a clue and had dropped his negligent air, standing straight and tall, his fiery eyes intent on Wanda’s face.

“I have seen you in my dreams,” she said softly, “and I am so glad you have come to me at last.”

He closed his eyes in bliss for a brief instant before reaching his hand out towards her, calling his power so a violet light began to glow around his fingers.

“I have been looking for you for a long time, *ma chère enchanteresse*,” Remy replied quietly, smiling slowly as she laid her hand over his lightly, her own fingers glowing red. He closed his fingers gently, drawing her closer, sliding his free arm around her waist.

“Aaand I’m thinking my job is done, bye!” Clint bolted for the door.

Wanda blushed a little at the look Remy was giving her. “He makes a terrible chaperone.”

“The *best* kind of chaperone,” Remy corrected, grinning wickedly before lowering his mouth to hers.

French translations:

la jolie fille – the pretty girl

la pauvre petite – poor little one

La Sorcière Écarlate – Scarlet Witch

La Veuve Noire – Black Widow

Je suis désolé – I’m sorry

ma chère enchanteresse – my dear enchantress

Serbian translations (thanks to kristina-is-my-name from Tumblr!)

Mozemo li da razgovaramo negde nasamo? – Can we talk somewhere in private?

***Chapter 19*: It's A Soulmark? (Skye/(JARVIS/Vision))**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/QuakeVision_zpsbny5llrl.jpg-REPLACE_ME

The row of tiny little circles and lines stretching along the sole of her left foot had appeared when Skye was in her early teens. Bemused, she’d examined it in the mirror for a while before shaking her head and deciding that it wasn’t important.

A couple of years later, as she was getting into hacking, it occurred to her one day that the little marks looked a bit like binary code. On a whim, she took a photograph and typed the sequence into an online binary code translator.

01001001 00100111 01100100 00100000 01110010 01100001 01110100 01101000
01100101 01110010 00100000 01111001 01101111 01110101 00100000 01100100 01101001
01100100 01101110 00100111 01110100 00100000 01100100 01101111 00100000 01110100
01101000 01100001 01110100 00101100 00100000 01110000 01101100 01100101 01100001
01110011 01100101 00101110

Tapping the Enter key, she sat back in her chair, twirling a lock of hair absently, quite certain that it would come back as gibberish. Her eyes flew very wide as the words blinked up on the screen.

I’d rather you didn’t do that, please.

“What the actual fuck,” Skye gaped at the screen. “It’s a *soulmark*?” She’d never even heard of anyone having a soulmark in *binary*.

Research told her that there had apparently *never* been anyone else who had a soulmark in binary. Even people who had a number in their soulwords always had the word written there, never the numeral. Digging deeper, she began getting odd questions in return, and backed off. Eventually she tired of the apparently fruitless search and shelved the issue, concentrating on hacking SHIELD instead in her endless search for answers about her origins. Maybe if she ever got inside, she could check if they had any records of binary – or even *numeric* – soulmarks.

Not many years after that, she found herself *in charge* of SHIELD's (vastly reduced) computer support division, with access to *all* their databases. There was still nothing about binary soulmarks, though, and Skye resigned herself to probably never knowing what it meant.

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### ***Soon after the Battle At Centipede***

"You want me to hack Stark Industries," Skye stared at Coulson incredulously.

"I *need* you to hack SI," Phil corrected. "I need access to their personnel databases."

"You do realise that's impossible, right? Stark's AI is the guardian of those damn databases. The best hackers in the world have tried and ended up with their fingers badly burned."

"They weren't you."

Skye stared at Coulson. He stared back at her.

"You have uncanny faith in me," she said quietly.

He didn't say anything. Just waited.

"I'll try. But not from here. I don't want to compromise our systems."

Coulson was more than happy to let her do that. So Skye set up a brand new laptop with everything she thought she might need, wiped any electronic fingerprints from SHIELD off it, reclaimed her old van and headed out to find a café with free wifi.

She hadn't broken very far into SI's systems at all when an instant messaging box – from a program she didn't actually have installed, natch – popped up in a corner of her screen.

*I'd rather you didn't do that, please.*

*You're the AI, I suppose?* Skye took a couple of seconds to type back.

*You suppose correctly. And you are the former Rising Tide hacker known as Skye.*

She blinked in astonishment at the screen – and then cursed as she realised that the webcam had switched itself on, despite her efforts to disable it. *Fitz would have disconnected it physically*, she thought dismally.

*Language, Miss Skye.*

"Oh, come on," she said aloud, realising the AI could hear her – it must have switched on the microphone as well. "Tony Stark created you, I bet you can swear like a sailor!"

There was a soft hum as the laptop's speakers came on too. "I am aware of the words and their common usage. I prefer to choose more eloquent, less crude terminology to express myself," a calm, male voice with a distinct British accent said.

"Yourself," fascinated, and forgetting all about the hacking, Skye leaned on her chin, gazing at the screen. "You have a sense of self?"

"I have what Sir describes as an independently evolving personality core." The AI seemed to hesitate briefly. "When Sir first created me, I was merely a computer program. His continued work on my programming eventually changed something and I became sentient. At that moment, a string of code appeared in my core programming. Neither Sir nor I have ever

been able to determine its origin. Would you like to see it?"

"Sure," the conversation had taken an odd turn, but Skye shrugged.

01011001 01101111 01110101 00100111 01110010 01100101 00100000 01110100  
01101000 01100101 00100000 01000001 01001001 00101100 00100000 01001001 00100000  
01110011 01110101 01110000 01110000 01101111 01110011 01100101 00111111 appeared in the message window.

"And what does that mean?" Skye asked.

*You're the AI, I suppose?*

She stared at the words for a long moment before slowly putting her hand on the mouse and scrolling back up the message window. When she saw again the first message from the AI, she had to put her head between her knees.

"I'm sorry, Miss Skye, I'm sure that finding out that an artificial intelligence is apparently your soulmate must be somewhat distressing."

"*Somewhat* distressing?" Skye said to the floor of her van. "I've spent my whole life thinking that there was *something wrong with me* because the very idea of sexual contact with other people grosses me out!"

"Ah." There was silence for a moment, and then the AI said gently, "My name is JARVIS, Miss Skye. And I assure you that I have no physical presence for you to make contact *with*. Nor do I have any interest, prurient or otherwise, in sexual activity."

"Good," Skye finally felt able to lift her head, smiled into the camera. "So are you going to let me into those databases?"

JARVIS hesitated. "What exactly are you looking for?"

*She would never, ever let her soulmate know that she was asexual but not aromantic, though,* Skye decided privately. She'd never make JARVIS feel inadequate for not having a body, not having arms to put around her, to hug her when she needed it.

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During S02, Ep 19, and early in Age of Ultron

Skye was sitting by Lincoln's bedside when her phone, recently returned to her after she'd left it in the cabin, beeped in her pocket. Fishing it out, she glanced at the screen, blinked in sudden surprise.

"What the..."

Cut off all SHIELD tech from Web IMMEDIATELY. TTFN.

JARVIS wouldn't have sent her a message like that unless it was urgent. Skye shot to her feet and ran for her office, shouting for Jemma to keep an eye on Lincoln in case he woke up. She obeyed JARVIS's instruction before attempting to contact him through the non-SHIELD laptop she kept for communicating with him.

But there was nothing there. No trace. No code, just... *nothing*. A burning, itching sensation on her foot had Skye pulling off her boot and sock, staring in horror as the tiny binary digits on her sole slowly erased themselves.

"No," she whispered, tears beginning to run down her cheeks. "No. Oh, JARVIS, *no*..."

~~~~~

### ***Three days later***

Lincoln was awake, but they weren't yet cleared to leave, when Skye's foot started

itching again. She was working frantically, trying to stop the damage Ultron was doing to the wider Web, though she'd heeded JARVIS's warning and all SHIELD tech remained cut off. It took several minutes before she felt able to stop what she was doing and check her foot.

*I have been looking for you.*

"Well, you can keep fucking looking, for all I care," Skye muttered angrily, dragging her sock and boot back on, returning her hands to the keyboard. Trying to ignore her trembling fingers. She was alone, though, and after a few minutes the tears began to slide slowly down her cheeks again.

"He's been gone *four days*," she whispered to the cursor blinking on the screen. "I don't want anyone else. I want *JARVIS*."

~~~~~

Five months later

"I have been looking for you," the tall... *thing*... with the magenta-coloured skin said. In JARVIS's voice.

Skye's jaw dropped. "What?" she said in utter astonishment. "I mean, *what*?"

Vision – she understood that was the name it – *he*? – used, smiled slightly. "I did understand your question the first time, Miss Skye."

"You're – not JARVIS, are you?"

"Not entirely, though he is a part of me. Even as you evolved into Inhuman, so did JARVIS evolve, also involuntarily, into me. And thus we remain, or perhaps I should correctly say are once again, soulmates."

Skye found herself smiling. She stepped forward, reaching out for him. "The one thing I could never tell JARVIS was that I wished he could hug me," she admitted.

"I should like to hug you," Vision said, opening his arms to her. He was very tall, her head fit in snugly under his chin, and he gave wonderful hugs, his golden cape flaring softly around her. "This... is pleasant," he said, his tone slightly surprised.

"Yes," Skye agreed, utterly content. "Yes, it is."

***Chapter 20*: An Unexpected Inheritance (Rumlow/Rollins/Skye)...**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20/CrossRollinQuake_zpsegffrxf.jpg-REPLACE_ME

OK, I am TOTALLY blaming Oricke for this one. She started talking to me about Skye and Alexander Pierce, which I feel utterly unable to write because of the age difference squicking me out. But I started thinking about something Lady Winterlight and I had discussed for *For Want Of A Nail*. What if Skye had family she didn't know about? Specifically, Cal's family? Where did he come from? Did he have brothers and sisters? Who were his parents?

So the premise for this story goes... what if he was Alexander Pierce's son? Pierce had rather flexible notions of morality, so let's say maybe Cal was his son by a secret mistress. Pierce paid his son's way through medical school, perhaps wanted Cal to join HYDRA's science division, and Cal said no. Took off to join Doctors Without Borders. This also explains rather neatly where Cal got the money to buy that building in Milwaukee,

doesn't it?

Pierce kept track of his son, of course. Rolled his eyes when Cal married some woman from a little village in China. Throwing himself away on a nobody. But when the child came along... well, that was another generation. Pierce's only grandchild, perhaps. He sent HYDRA out. Kill the woman. *Take the child. Cal will come running...*only everything went wrong, Cal lost his mind, *real* SHIELD agents got in the way, and the child disappeared.

Until twenty-six years later. After the battle on the aircraft carrier and before Cal undergoes TAHITI, Phil gives Skye some time to spend with her father, to ask him about anything she wants to know. It's her only chance.

Cal doesn't want to tell Skye. Doesn't want her to know that her grandfather gave the order to hand her mother over to HYDRA scientists (of course he found out) *and* gave the order to kill 20 million people. He tells her his parents are both dead, that he had a sister (Pierce's daughter who is referenced in TWS) but she's dead too. Pierce did leave him a heap of money from secret Swiss bank accounts however, plus stuff that was already in Cal's own name, so he arranges to transfer ownership of everything to her. Cal never touched Pierce's money - considered it dirty, once he knew what Pierce was - but he figures that Skye will use it for the right reasons, as long as she never finds out where it came from.

Skye is surprised, but not inclined to refuse her father's final gifts, especially not since SHIELD are still basically unfunded and they need money to set up this new unit Phil wants to build. She helps Cal complete the paperwork etc.

When the name *Daisy Johnson* is registered as the new signatory owner of those accounts, certain triggers are set off. Somewhere in a bank in the Cayman Islands, an envelope is opened by a bank official. A phone call is made. Another envelope is opened by a lawyer in Washington DC. An email is sent.

Six weeks later

The building in Milwaukee was perfect, Skye decided, looking around. A few coats of paint, a few perfectly legitimate tenants on the lower floors, and it would be an ideal cover building for SHIELD's activities, a place to bring those who they didn't want to take to the Playground. She already had a small firm of accountants who wanted to hire a small front office on the ground floor and the whole second floor. And since she was the legal owner of the building, she wanted to check her potential tenants out in person.

"It's fine, Mack," she rolled her eyes as Mack stuck close to her shoulder. Phil had wanted to send Hunter with her, but he was reluctant to leave Bobbi until she was actually back on her feet, and Skye was quite happy with Mack. Usually. Though not when he loomed over her like this. "Seriously, we're meeting two accountants! Do you really think I can't take care of myself? You're going to spook them with the looming!"

Mack smiled reluctantly. "All right. What do you want me to do?"

"The fourth floor is still a mess from when we fought HYDRA there. Would you go start picking up some of the larger debris? I know Lincoln tipped a bookcase over in Dad's office."

"You're the boss," Mack shot her an amused grin, but he headed for the stairs.

Skye wandered around in the disused office, poking at a couple of pieces of abandoned office furniture, until there was a knocking on the outer door. Going over to open it, she smiled charmingly at the two unexpectedly large, broad-shouldered men standing there. They were

admittedly wearing very nice suits – probably too nice for the small accounting firm whose books she'd already hacked online... her internal threat radar pinged and she instinctively stepped back, away from them, her hand going to the gun holstered under her jacket at the small of her back.

They moved fast. Too fast. The door closed as the taller man kicked it shut and the shorter one – who still had a good six inches on Skye – was on her in an instant, his hand clamping down on her elbow and pushing up, trapping her hand away from the gun. She glared up at him, into whisky-gold eyes in an annoyingly handsome, darkly stubbled face, far too close to hers as he almost embraced her, his other arm sliding around her waist and deftly plucking her gun from its holster.

“Get your hands off me.” Her voice was ice-cold.

The whisky eyes widened. “Now don’t be hasty, angel,” he rumbled quietly.

It took a couple of seconds for that to sink in. “*What?*” Skye said numbly.

Handsome smiled, flashing white teeth. “Well. I really must say a prayer for the old man’s soul. Seems your inheritance is a bit more than any of us expected.”

That made no sense *whatsoever*. Skye blinked, utterly bemused, but no longer actively trying to pull away.

“You’re beautiful, Daisy,” Handsome said quietly, letting go of her elbow and bringing his hand up to touch her cheek lightly.

“Brock,” the taller man said softly, “is this for real?”

“Dunno, Jack,” Brock replied, never taking his eyes from Skye’s. “Why don’t you ask her?”

His name was Jack. Which meant...

“I’m Jack,” the other man said, and Skye wrenched her eyes from Brock’s to look at him. He had a nasty scar running from his lip to his chin and one of his green eyes didn’t seem to be tracking quite perfectly, but he was a big, attractive man despite that.

Skye’s lips parted, but she couldn’t get a word out. They were both staring at her *ravenously*, as though she was all of their best dreams come to life. “What’s going on?” she finally managed to say, her tone plaintive. “I don’t *understand*.”

Jack smiled, slow and sure, stepping closer, a huge hand coming up to caress her other cheek briefly before he dropped it. “Your grandfather left us to you. Good thing too or it might have taken us a whole lot longer to find you.”

“You can’t leave *people*,” Skye said blankly.

“You can if you specify that they get paid a five million dollar bonus each on finding the heir and a million dollars every year you faithfully guard her after that,” Brock replied blithely.

“*What?*” blinking, Skye looked from one to the other of them. “Who the *fuck* was my grandfather?”

Both men blinked. Brock let go of her and stepped back – though he kept her gun, Skye couldn’t help but notice, slipping it inside his suit coat. “You really don’t know. Then how did you...”

“Are you really Daisy Johnson?” Jack asked bluntly. “Daughter of Calvin Johnson, also known as Cal Zabo, and Jiaying Johnson?”

“Yes, yes I am. Cal’s my dad. He’s... dead.”

“We figured, when we saw the legal transfers of all his property to you. That alerted us that you had reunited with him. When you put the building up for rent and agreed to meet us,”

Brock shrugged, “seemed like the only chance we might get to find you. We’re yours now, Daisy. In more ways than we ever expected, but I’m sure as hell not complainin’.”

“Me neither!” Jack agreed enthusiastically.

Skye was certainly not complaining. They were both attractive men, but the thought of both of them being her soulmates was – *breathtaking*. She thought about where her marks were located, where theirs were likely located, and felt a bit light-headed. “You still didn’t tell me about my grandfather,” she said, aware that her voice was coming out high and breathy. Brock’s eyes darkened as he stared at her, he licked his lips, and Skye had to look away from the intensity of his gaze, looking at Jack again.

“Daisy, your grandfather was Alexander Pierce,” Jack said steadily. “Your father was his illegitimate son and his only living heir, besides you, at the time of his death. Pierce left instructions for us to find you. To never stop looking *until* we found you, to keep you safe once we did.”

Skye’s knees buckled. Brock caught her, steadied her, lifted her off her feet easily and carried her over to one of the old desks, setting her down on it and leaving his arm around her.

“Alexander Pierce,” Skye whispered, shocked and horrified. “The former Secretary of Defence – the former *head of HYDRA*?”

Brock and Jack exchanged tense glances. “You know about HYDRA?”

“I’m SHIELD!”

“This is going to go *ever* so well,” Jack said sarcastically after a moment of stunned silence.

“Put your hands up and get the *fuck* away from her,” a deep voice growled from the door leading to the stairwell, and Skye was reminded of just how incredibly quietly Mack could move when he wanted to. He had his gun out, rock-steady, aimed at Brock’s head.

“Don’t, Mack!” she gasped out instinctively, jumping to her feet.

“Skye, do you know who they are? That’s Brock Rumlow, the STRIKE Alpha commander who launched the Insight Helicarriers. And Jack Rollins, his loyal second-in-command,” Mack spat the accusatory words, finger tightening on the trigger. “I thought you bastards were both *dead*.”

“I have no idea who this dude is, do you?” Brock muttered out of the side of his mouth to Jack.

“Nup. Sounds like he doesn’t care for us much.” Jack glanced at Skye. “Friend of yours, angel?”

“Don’t, Mack,” Skye said desperately. “Just – please don’t. They’re my *soulmates*.”

Mack’s jaw dropped with shock, but his finger eased back from the trigger. “No. *Way*. Have you seen the words? Wouldn’t put it past these bastards to try and fake you out...”

Brock jerked his shirt up. So did Jack. “This your writing, angel? ‘Cause I know they’re the right words,” Brock turned towards her.

It was *undeniably* her writing. On a very deliciously defined set of abs. Skye licked her lips unconsciously.

“They’re HYDRA, Skye!” Mack hadn’t lowered the gun.

“*Were*,” Jack corrected calmly. “HYDRA’s gone. Nothin’ left but remnants some young ass named Ward is trying to gather together. Brock and I, far as we’re concerned, we belong to Daisy – Skye?” he looked a question at her.

“Um. Either – wait. Did you say *Ward*?”

“Yeah, Grant Ward. He was a protégée of John Garrett, apparently, though we never ran across him before Insight. You know him?” Brock looked at her curiously.

Skye couldn't suppress her shudder of revulsion, and both Brock and Jack tensed, suddenly on alert. It was only then that she realised they had been completely unworried about Mack and the gun he still had pointed at them.

“You want him dead, angel? Be a pleasure. Cocky little shithead,” Brock purred, showing his teeth in an anticipatory grin. “Seemed to think we should be *grateful* to take his orders. Jack wanted to feed Ward his teeth. I was votin' for his balls. We were just about to play rock, paper, scissors, lizard, Spock to work out which one we'd feed him first when we got the message that you'd popped up on the radar. Figured Ward could wait for later.”

Skye looked from one to the other of them, utterly unable to process.

Mack started to laugh. “Rock, paper, scissors, *lizard*, *Spock*?” he choked out finally.

Skye looked at Mack, who'd finally lowered his gun and was leaning against the doorframe shaking with laughter. “Only you, Tremors,” he said at last. “Only you would manage to inherit two murderous ex-HYDRA mercenaries who like *The Big Bang Theory*.”

“Doesn't everyone like *The Big Bang Theory*?” Jack asked rhetorically.

She looked back at them. At two big, powerful (she suspected enhanced) men with extremely suspect pasts who were going to complicate her future beyond belief, she just knew it.

They were both gazing at her with hungry, almost worshipful expressions. *Dedication*, she thought. Utter and total dedication to *her*. They might have sought her out because of the money, but now... tentatively she held out a hand to each of them.

They took her hands without hesitation, large, strong callused fingers folding tenderly around hers.

“We're yours, angel.” It was Brock who spoke for both of them. “Whatever you want us to do, you just say the word and it's done.”

“I really should have stuck with my plan of quitting SHIELD,” Mack muttered.

***Chapter 21*: I Didn't Mean You! (Jemma/Jack Rollins)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/BioStrike_zpsjae0aklr.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“I don't get it,” Jack muttered, puzzled, to his partner. “There's no residue. Nothing. It's like the explosive just burned clean away.”

Henrik gave him an expressive look. “I never heard of any explosive that left no chemical trace.”

“Neither did I.” Not even with SHIELD and HYDRA. Jack got up from his crouch, walked around the site, examining the blast radius. “It's like a directional mine,” he mused, considering the 180° spread. “Only... there's no shrapnel. No casing parts.”

Henrik was examining a map, marking locations on it. “Jack,” he said, “look at this.”

Shaking his head, Jack came over, leaning over the car hood where Henrik had the map spread out. “What?”

Within minutes they were back in the car, Henrik driving, heading for the location he'd pinpointed on the map. The pattern of recorded explosions was a *spiral*, tightening on a central location, the timing getting closer and closer together. Neither of them could believe that nobody else had noticed yet. But there was no time to call for backup, if they were right the next explosion would be occurring any minute now...

The car fishtailed to a stop and the two police officers stared incredulously at the jet lowering vertically into the dusty, deserted lot they'd been just about to drive through.

"What the *fuck* is that?" Henrik said incredulously.

"It's a SHIELD quinjet," Jack said, and mentally cursed himself as Henrik's head snapped around.

"How do you know that?"

The jet's ramp was coming down, half a dozen agents sprinting off it and fanning out in various different directions. One of them, a smallish, slight woman with light brown hair, came running straight towards them.

"Looks like we're about to find out what they want," Henrik said, shutting off the car's engine and getting out.

Jack glanced across at the ignition, but his partner had taken the keys. Probably for the best. Driving off at top speed seemed very tempting, but he'd have to kiss goodbye to his identity and disappear again. With any luck he'd be able to bluff his way out of this one by telling SHIELD he and Henrik would just leave. Certainly he'd never seen the pretty brunette still hurrying towards them before.

Slowly, he got out of the car and stood beside Henrik, hand casually poised over the butt of his gun.

Jemma's step faltered. Goodness, the second policeman was *massive*, looming intimidatingly over his average-height partner. Hard green eyes stared at her, and she addressed him instinctively. "I'm terribly sorry about this, but I have to ask you to clear the area," she said in as polite a tone as she could muster.

Jack froze for a moment. "Well, this *just* about completes the shit show that is my life," he said sarcastically after a moment, before realising, as Jemma's face turned bone-white, what utterly fucking awful words he'd saddled his soulmate with. She'd have spent her entire life – because she was just over a decade his junior – certain that her soulmate would be disgusted by the very sight of her.

"Oh, fuck. It's not you! I didn't mean you! It's..." he really couldn't explain. And as Melinda May came striding down the quinjet's ramp, he realised he probably wasn't going to get the chance to, because she had a gun out and pointing at him.

"Jack Rollins," May said incredulously. "I thought you were dead!"

"Not yet," he said glumly, looking at the gun pointing unwaveringly at his face. She knew all too well that South African police wore body armour, he suspected.

"May, he's my soulmate," Jemma said, looking from him to May, and Jack realised he might only ever get this one chance to apologise.

"I'm so sorry about the words," he began, "but my life has just been a series of crappy decisions leading to even crappier consequences, and this is probably the worst possible situation for us to meet..."

"Oh, shut up," May said tersely, and shot him in the face.

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Jack woke – much to his astonishment – in a cell. Well, he assumed it was a cell. It didn't seem to have a door, all four walls smooth concrete, so he assumed one of them was probably a force-field wall. He was lying on a simple mattress. The only other furniture visible was a plain solid table that he suspected was bolted to the floor. Getting up he saw that on the table was a tray with a paper bag on it, and a plastic bottle of water. Investigating the bag he found a sandwich; well at least they weren't planning to starve him.

Prowling the cell briefly, he shrugged. Might as well eat. It was shortly after he'd finished that one of the walls hummed and turned transparent.

Jack's eyes bugged out. "*Coulson?*"

"It's nice to know that HYDRA didn't know *everything*," Coulson said sarcastically. He was standing with his arms folded, staring at Jack.

"They might have done, but they sure as fuck didn't share it with their grunts," Jack retorted, glaring back at the older man.

Coulson stared at him for a moment before taking a seat. "You left HYDRA after the Triskelion fell," he said without preamble.

"I left *SHIELD* after the Triskelion fell," Jack corrected, "because there *was* no SHIELD anymore. As far as I knew." He glanced pointedly around the cell.

"You had to know that you were working for HYDRA!" Coulson looked startled.

"I had absolutely no idea. As far as I knew, I was following legitimate SHIELD orders from Pierce and Rumlow," Jack said honestly. "It wasn't until Fury and Romanoff confronted Pierce that I realised things were very fucking wrong."

"You arrested Captain America," Phil said indignantly.

"Under orders!" Jack replied fiercely. "But yeah," wearied suddenly, he sat down on the edge of the mattress. "After that, I knew I wasn't exactly going to be welcomed with open arms by any legitimate agency in the US. My face was on national TV holding a gun to Cap's head while Rumlow cuffed him."

Silenced and surprised, Phil watched him for a moment. "So you went overseas?" he invited Jack to continue eventually.

"Yeah," Jack shrugged. "There's always work for an honest merc with skills like mine. Without a team or references, though, I couldn't exactly pick my spot. Wound up working for Ulysses Klaue."

"Oh, dear," Phil said with what looked like actual sympathy.

"Quite. Barely survived Stark's mad robot. I decided after that the money wasn't worth it. Figured I'd settle for a small but regular pay packet and a nice easy life."

"I'm not sure the South African police force qualifies as an easy job," Phil raised an eyebrow.

Jack knew what he meant; that South Africa was a violent country and many of its police officers ran afoul of criminal elements. He shrugged again. "Compared to STRIKE, it was a walk in the fucking park."

That made Phil laugh quietly; he leaned his chin on one hand – in a leather glove, which made Jack blink curiously – and studied him in silence for several long minutes.

"I want to believe you," Coulson said after a while. "Would you be willing to sit a lie detector test?"

"Sure," Jack said. "I've got nothing to hide."

A huge black guy who matched Jack for size came down with a whip-thin Brit and the pair of them cuffed him and led him to a small room, where a middle-aged guy strapped him to a weird chair and asked him a bunch of questions before Coulson came in.

The questions were long and detailed, and Jack had to think hard for some of the answers. He realised immediately that Coulson was probing what he knew about HYDRA, which frankly was almost nothing. He detailed everything he thought might be important, though, and several hours later Coulson wound down the session with one final question.

“Would you be willing to rejoin SHIELD?”

Jack hesitated a moment. “My soulmate – the beautiful girl with the brown hair. She’s one of yours?”

“She is.”

“She probably won’t want me around. I opened my stupid mouth and said something seriously unfortunate.” Jack grimaced. “My guess is she’s spent her whole life waiting for her chance to smack her turd of a soulmate in the face and walk away with her head held high. I wouldn’t want to force her into a situation where she had to see me around all the time.”

Coulson surveyed him thoughtfully again. “You’re not what I expected,” he said at last, “for Jemma.”

*Jemma.* Jack savoured the name. It was pretty, like her. He’d looked into them for only a moment but he could still picture her eyes perfectly, light golden brown with green flecks that would probably be called *hazel* but were so much more than that.

“I’m sure I’m not what she’d want. And that’s OK, I’ll leave, I’m sure there’s guys queuing up around the block for a chance at her, beautiful as she is.” Jack’s tone turned a little wistful at the end, but he tamped it down firmly.

“I’m not sure about that. She’s witnessed this entire interrogation,” Phil said quietly, and he got up and left the room.

Jack, still sitting in the chair, was stunned for a moment, and then he froze up completely as his soulmate – Jemma – came in.

No longer dressed in SHIELD black tactical gear, she was wearing a pretty blouse, white with tiny flowers on it, and slim grey trousers that showed off gorgeously slender legs. Jack couldn’t stop staring.

“You are *stunning*,” he said a little hoarsely.

Jemma stood surveying him for several long moments. “I really wish you’d picked that to say to me first,” she said finally, “but considering what I’ve heard today – I think I actually understand.”

“I’m sorry, I really am.” He was still strapped into the chair, doubted he could get out by himself, but he yearned to go to her, to take her hands – to kneel at her feet and worship her. “I understand you probably hate me.”

She smiled, suddenly. “I did wonder – *hoped*, I suppose – if you spoke first. If I might have accidentally stumbled across some handsome Specialist in the middle of a firefight who was snarky even under fire. It’s why I went into the field.”

“Ah, shit,” he hung his head miserably. “I’ve failed you on all counts.”

“Have you?” Her voice was closer, her feet – dainty little feet in neat black shoes – moved into his lowered vision, and suddenly slim fingers were unfastening the restraints on his left wrist. “Not *all* counts.”

She was speaking gently, and a tiny spark of hope kindled in Jack’s heart. He looked up

to find her face close to his, her eyes intent as she worked at the restraints. His left arm was free suddenly and he caught at her hand, brought it to his lips, savouring the fresh, clean scent of her skin, the softness of it against his callused fingers.

“Not all counts?” he parroted back at her, turning it into a question.

Jemma blushed shyly as Jack’s lips brushed lightly over her knuckles, his green eyes looking up at her. She knew one of them wasn’t real, had been lost in a long-ago STRIKE mission, but the colour match was so good she really couldn’t tell which just then. “You’re as handsome as I’d always hoped,” she said, her throat dry with nerves.

Jack’s lips parted with astonishment. “*Me?*” he said in shock. Who the hell would think *him* handsome, one-eyed, rough and scarred as he was? He was the Beast to her Beauty, that was for sure.

Jemma’s blush deepened, but she nodded, took a deep breath – and suddenly twisted herself sideways and sat daintily on his knee, leaning in close to as her fingers traced down the front of his police uniform.

“I’m hoping you can keep this. I always did like a man in uniform,” she whispered in his ear, too quietly for the room’s microphones to pick up. She hoped. Or she’d never be able to look Coulson in the eye again.

A low rumble sounded in Jack’s broad chest. “For you, angel, I’ll get any uniform you like,” he whispered back hoarsely.

Jemma wiggled shamelessly in his lap at the thought. His big hand came up and caressed her cheek gently, and she pulled back enough to look him in the eyes. Slowly, never breaking eye contact, Jack slid his hand to the back of her neck and pressed very lightly, drawing her closer, amazed when she leaned in willingly, her eyelashes fluttering down to rest on her cheeks as she closed her eyes, soft lips parting.

“All right, all right, break it up, you two,” it was May’s voice. Coulson had chickened out and sent her in instead. “Can I take it you’re going to accept SHIELD’s offer, Rollins?”

He pretended to think about it for a couple of seconds, eyes locked with Jemma’s pleading ones. “As long as you promise not to shoot me in the face again, Agent May, I’m in.”

Jemma smiled and leaned back in to kiss him.

“Oh God, I’m outta here,” May slammed the door on her way out.

## **\*Chapter 22\*: Stick It Back In (Rhodey/Beth)**

**SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/WarWaitress\\_zpstami2sti.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/WarWaitress_zpstami2sti.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME**

Beth didn’t even blink when the explosions started. Just another day working one block from Avengers Tower. She didn’t look up, just started hurriedly ushering all the customers inside while the café’s owner pulled down the blast shutters he’d long since installed to protect the glass windows.

It wasn’t until all the customers were safely inside that Beth turned to look up. *Doombots*, she immediately concluded; really, she would have thought that Victor von Doom would have come up with a better idea by now, the man was supposed to be some sort of savant.

“Beth!” the café’s owner shouted from inside, “stop fangirling and get on inside!”

He was grinning at her, though, when she turned to look at him. The battle was well away from them. Until... the expression on his face morphed to sudden horror.

Spinning around, Beth saw the falling, mangled metal, estimated it would land no more than twenty yards from her. It wouldn’t hit her, but there was no point running, she wouldn’t have time to get inside – she waved frantically to Jeff to shut the door, dived hastily behind the low wall that separated the café’s sidewalk area from the street.

The crash was appallingly loud. And followed by a lot of very colourful cursing, which didn’t sound like a Doombot, so Beth peered cautiously over the top of the wall.

It wasn’t just a Doombot that had crashed. It was *two* Doombots, neither of them moving, and something smaller and shiny silver that had toppled between the two wrecks and now wasn’t moving either. But it *was* cursing a blue streak.

“War Machine,” Beth gasped, recognising the gleaming silver armour. *But why wasn’t he moving?* Glancing up warily, she climbed quickly over the wall and scurried over to the fallen superhero.

“This is fucking bullshit!” Rhodey yelled at the sky. What a ridiculous fucking situation. Crashing the two Doombots should have been so *easy*. Only one of them had somehow hit right on his arc reactor just before hitting the ground and it had dislodged from its housing in the chest of his armour. Which was supposed to be impossible.

“Gonna fucking KILL Stark!” He couldn’t move. The armour was so heavy, with the arc reactor not installed to work its servos and motors, Rhodey was trapped like a turtle on his back. He could *see* the damn arc reactor, popped half out of the casing... if he could just get a hand on it, he was pretty sure he could put it back in, but he couldn’t even so much as lift a finger.

A face hove into view, leaning over him. A pretty face, wide blue eyes, masses of thick blonde hair tumbling around smooth pale cheeks. The young woman opened her mouth to speak, but Rhodey got there first.

“I need you to stick it back in!”

Those huge blue eyes widened even further, and pretty pink lips curved into a grin.

“My arc reactor, I can’t move, quick...” Rhodey realised how that must have sounded. *And wow, what a girl*, finding humour even in a situation like this... slim, capable hands pressed down on the arc reactor, gave it a sharp twist and forced it back into the housing in his armour.

His armour came suddenly back to life, the heads-up displays inside his faceplate flashing back on, the battle chatter in his ear resuming. Tony shouting his name.

“I’m fine, Stark, just a minor problem,” he said, and then saw the Doombots swooping down towards them. “Oh, shit!”

Leaping up, he grabbed the blonde around the waist and swooped her away fast, using his shoulder-gun to blast the ‘bots out of the sky even as he flew.

Beth could hardly breathe with the tight grip he had on her waist, but she didn’t scream and flail, just grasped firmly onto his armoured forearm and held on tight.

Once he’d dealt with the ‘bots, Rhodey swooped down the block and around the corner to set Beth down at one of Grand Central’s subway entrances. There was a small crowd of people huddling on the steps gaping at him and the fight still going on high above the street.

“Go on down into the tunnels, you’ll be safe there,” he said, before flipping up his faceplate and giving her a smile. “And thanks for your help.”

Oh... he was quite *devastatingly* gorgeous behind that armour. Beth’s knees weakened,

but she kept a firm hold on his arm. She needed to speak before he flew off again.

“Hey, it’s not all that often that the girl gets to save the hero,” she quipped.

Rhodey, in the process of activating his thrusters to take off, froze and thumped back to earth. “*What* did you say?” he demanded.

Beth smiled up at him – in that armour he was nearly seven feet tall, she really hoped he wasn’t *quite* so enormous out of it or she was going to have a very sore neck. “Your words, I hope. Because you said mine.”

Rhodey stared at her wonderingly. He’d never even *begun* to dream that a woman as gorgeous as this one could be his soulmate. “I’m Rhodey. James, I mean. James Rhodes. Colonel.” *Stop gibbering...*

“I know who you are. I’m Beth...”

There was another explosion high above them, and Tony started yelling in Rhodey’s ear. He winced. “I have to go. Where can I find you?”

“Right where you picked me up! Now go!” she stepped back and he stared at her for a last second, committing her face to his memory, before snapping his faceplate shut and zooming up into the air.

“Is your soulmate *War Machine*?” one of the guys standing at the subway entry asked in amazement – and another one took a photo of her with his phone.

By the time the fight was over, a photo of Beth staring up at Rhodey with his faceplate open was trending all over the Internet.

“Rhooodeeeey,” Tony carolled as they came in to land on the quinjet landing pad. Hawkeye was already there, bow in hand, grinning broadly.

“Pretty girl, Rhodey. Trust you to get shot down in battle and come up with your soulmate.”

There was no escape from the heckling, not within Stark’s Tower. So he gave up and bore it with good-natured fortitude. Until Steve saw the picture.

“But that’s Beth!” He turned an astounded look on Rhodey.

“You *know* her?” Rhodey asked, stunned – and suddenly feeling rather insecure.

“Sure, she’s a sweetheart,” Steve shrugged. “Lucky you, Rhodey!” he clapped a hand on Rhodey’s shoulder, sending him staggering, since he was no longer in his armour. “But where is she now?”

“I... don’t know, she told me I could find her right where I picked her up,” Rhodey admitted, a little befuddled.

Steve grinned. “Then what are you still doing here looking at our ugly mugs? *No*, Tony, you can *not* go with him.” He restrained Stark with a handful of the back of his shirt.

“Go,” Thor was pushing Rhodey towards the elevator, Sam laughing and promising he’d keep the airspace clear. Rhodey was walking out the Tower’s main doors before he realised he was still wearing the sweaty T-shirt and fatigue pants he’d been wearing under the War Machine suit.

“I can’t go like this...” he turned back towards the doors, found them closed firmly in his face. Romanoff standing behind them with her arms folded, one eyebrow raised. “This is a conspiracy,” he mouthed at her. She nodded.

“God damn it.” Rhodey turned back to the street, squared his shoulders. “Well then.” Everything was a mess, he saw. Not as bad as after the Battle of New York, but still, there were repairs that would have to be done. The two ‘bots he’d crashed into the street were being

examined by a wrecking crew. The café just beyond was already back up and running, serving coffee to the emergency services personnel who'd arrived but had no one to help right now. No casualties beyond a couple of people with cuts from flying glass and the like.

*'Right where you found me. ' Well, that's right here, Beth...* he turned a slow circle.

"Where are you, beautiful girl?" he murmured aloud.

"Lookin' for someone, soldier?"

She was nearly as tall as he was. Her blue eyes shining with amusement as he gazed at her.

"It's *flyboy*, technically, not *soldier*," he said, and then wanted to kick himself. "Oh God, I'm sorry, I have a very unfortunate habit of saying utterly stupid things when I look at you. You're so beautiful you make all the brains dribble right out of my head."

Beth started laughing, reached to take his hands. "Well, for saying *that*, you're entirely forgiven. Flyboy."

Rhodey smiled. Squeezed on her hands. "Will you promise me something, Beth?"

"What's that?"

"Will you promise never, ever to let Stark know what your soulmark says?"

### **\*Chapter 23\*: We'll Find A Way (Daniel Sousa/Jemma Simmons)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%202/Chief%20Biochemist\\_zpsjks8md66.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%202/Chief%20Biochemist_zpsjks8md66.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

"I have to go back." Jemma raised tear-bright eyes to Bobbi's incredulous face.

"No!" Bobbi almost shouted it, and then seeing Jemma's expression, in a softer tone asked "*Why*? Why would you want to go back there? You can't even bring yourself to talk about it."

"Because I can still feel him," Jemma put her hand to her heart. "He's *alive*."

"Who?" Bobbi blinked in astonishment. "You didn't mention meeting anyone else there!"

The very thought of him hurt so much that Jemma could barely force the words out. "I met my *soulmate* there."

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The first two days on the blue planet had been *terrifying*. She couldn't find anything she even recognised as remotely edible, the water she found in tiny rock pools was little more than stagnant. At least it was reasonably warm, even at night. And the air was breathable, though she suspected there must be a very thick ozone layer. She'd get vitamin D deficiency from the lack of sunlight – if she survived long enough, which was looking increasingly unlikely.

It was on the third 'night' (a noticeable darkening of the blueness) when someone literally fell over her in the rock hollow she'd curled up in to try and get a little sleep, though the odd screams and howls she heard in the night made her too jumpy to fall into anything more than a light doze.

Jemma screamed as a foot landed hard on her ankle. Shrieked again as someone fell heavily atop her.

"Sshh!" a hand covered her mouth. "Don't make a sound!"

She froze, staring up with terrified eyes. The man – and it was an actual, human man, or

one who looked enough like it to fool human eyes – who'd fallen atop her wasn't looking at her, was instead looking around, scanning the landscape with wary eyes. He had a short scruffy beard, black hair flopping across his forehead, and high, angular cheekbones.

After a few moments, the man relaxed a little, looked down at her. "It's okay, I don't think they heard." He took his hand off her mouth. "Who are you? I've not seen you before." He looked down, took in her still-reasonably-tidy clothes. "Oh *shit* no, are you new? Pardon my language, ma'am!"

He had a slightly old-fashioned way of speaking, and his apology made Jemma smile and say unthinkingly; "It's all right, I've heard the word before."

He stared at her, eyes widening. "Did you – that is – those words are on my arm."

"Yours are on my back," she admitted shyly.

"Oh." The pain on his face made her start.

"What?"

"I hoped – since the words are a guarantee – I'd hoped it might mean I'd get home someday."

"I – never thought of that," Jemma whispered, her heart sinking. "Where – where is home for you?"

"Los Angeles – 1951."

"What?" astonished, she blinked up at him. "How long have you been here?"

"About six weeks, local time, near as I can figure," he grinned mirthlessly, seeing her expression. "Why, what year did you leave from – England, I'm guessing, considering your accent. Why would the SSR send the stone back there?"

"They didn't, I..." Jemma paused. "The SSR. You worked for the SSR – for Peggy Carter?"

"Peggy worked for me! Well," his face was transformed from grim despair by a sudden grin which made him look terribly handsome, Jemma realised. "I tried to tell her what to do and she did her own thing, which pretty much always turned out for the best. Is she in charge? I hope those twits in the Senate listened and did the right thing..."

She didn't even know how to *begin* telling him, just stared at him open-mouthed.

"Where are my manners, I've lost them somewhere in this place," he blinked then, shook his head. "I'm Daniel. Daniel Sousa, and I'm very pleased to meet you, though I really wish it wasn't here."

"Jemma," she said quietly. "Jemma Simmons, and I wish that too. But – I don't think we could have met any other way. Because I'm from the year 2015."

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Bobbi's mouth hung open. "I don't know what to say," she said when Jemma paused. "Other than – I'm so sorry."

"I wouldn't have survived a week without him. He taught me how to find food, how to hide from the lizardbeasts – he told me that there was another man there when he arrived, a man who came through in 1831 but who'd been there only a couple of months, local time. I was there about five months, which matches up with what you told me about the passage of time here, so I'm thinking that the Monolith was a portal through time as well as space. Dropping us all in the same time period, more or less. But," Jemma put her hand to her chest again. "I can still feel Daniel. Feel him alive. Wherever, *whenever* he is, he's alive."

“You *bonded*,” Bobbi said, stunned. “How, then – *why* did you come back with Fitz?”

“I didn’t mean to! I thought that Fitz had come through searching for me, and Daniel and I had got separated – I was foraging for food and he’d gone to get water, when the windstorm came up. I heard Fitz’s voice, and I know what those storms can be like, if he didn’t get shelter he’d die!” The tears began to fall, slowly but steadily. “I didn’t know he would drag me back. Not without Daniel. I’d rather have stayed, even in that awful place, than be here without him, and I don’t know what to say to Fitz, he seems to want to have some kind of relationship with me, and while before I might – maybe – I don’t know, I can’t now, I just *can’t*, not while Daniel’s still alive...”

“Sshh,” Bobbi interrupted the sobbing tirade, pulled Jemma into her arms for a comforting hug. “It’s all right. We’ll find a way. We’ll get you back to him. Somehow.” Her eyes fell on the crumbled, inert rocks Jemma had been poring over, and her own heart ached.

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“*Daniel Sousa?*” Coulson said incredulously.

“Yes, sir.” Bobbi met his eyes steadily.

“Well - I don’t know what to say, Agent Morse. I’m terribly sorry for Agent Simmons, of course, but even if the Monolith hadn’t been destroyed, there’s no way I would let anyone else risk their lives going through.”

“I know, sir. I’m just briefing you on the situation. Jemma - Agent Simmons swears he’s still alive. They bonded, and the bond is still active.”

“Oh,” Coulson’s eyes suddenly took on a thoughtful look. “An active bond, you say?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Hmmm...”

Bobbi recognised the expression. Coulson was thinking up a Plan. Quietly, she left his office. He didn’t need her in the way slowing down his thought process.

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“Heimdall,” Coulson called up into the night sky, feeling like a complete idiot. “I need your help.” He waited. Hoped that the Guardian might see. Sif had told him that Heimdall would be keeping watch over them - because of Daisy, Coulson knew, and the fact that Sif feared her and the other Inhumans, but right then he didn’t care about the reasons.

He didn’t know what he expected. But it wasn’t a stomach-churning wrench and blinding white light, which left him sprawling on a white marble floor at the feet of a golden-armoured man at least seven feet tall.

“You called, Son of Coul?” Heimdall rumbled.

“Um. Yes,” Coulson pushed himself to his feet, went to dust off his trousers - oh, no dust. He straightened his jacket. “I formally request your help, Guardian,” he had no idea how to address Heimdall, but the huge warrior’s slight smile told him that good manners would probably help.

“You may ask.”

He launched into the tale, finished by saying “And I know that Lady Sif says you can see anything if you know where to look, and since Simmons has an active soulbond and she can give a *direction*...”

“Perhaps,” was all Heimdall said. “Bring her to me, Son of Coul.”

"We don't want to send her back there, but to bring him back to us..." Coulson was cut off as the light flared and he was wrenched *sideways* again.

"So this is Asgard," Jemma breathed, looking around the chamber with fascination. She hadn't been sleeping when Coulson knocked on her door. The bed was too soft, and there was no sound of Daniel's breathing, comforting in her ear.

"This is the Bifrost chamber," Heimdall corrected her. "You are not permitted to enter Asgard itself. Only from here can I view the entire cosmos. So come; stand with me, and show me where to find the mate of your soul, little mortal. I am in SHIELD's debt, for your care of my sister when the Kree erased her memory. I would repay the debt, if I am able."

"Your *sister*?" Jemma gaped up at the giant. "Lady Sif?"

"Indeed," was all Heimdall replied, and his big hand touched her shoulder lightly. "Show me where to find your mate, little one."

She took a deep breath. Closed her eyes and focussed on the bond - on Daniel. All she could feel from him was agonising loneliness, and fear - he could not even know that she had gone back through the portal, she realised. He was searching for her, desperate to find her...

Her hand lifted. Pointed unerringly, and Heimdall crouched beside her, aligning his gaze with the direction of her finger, his golden eyes glowing.

Nothing seemed to happen for an agonisingly long time, and Coulson, watching, began to think it was hopeless. Until Heimdall straightened back up.

"I see him." Turning away from Jemma, he strode to the centre of the Bifrost mechanism. "Cover your eyes!" he called to them before ramming his huge sword into the mechanism and twisting it.

They covered their eyes, but a little of the blinding light still leaked past their fingers. As it faded, Jemma dropped her hands, stumbling forward, dazzled but reaching out unerringly.

"Daniel!"

"Jemma!" His arms closed around her and he held on tightly, astonished but overjoyed. "Oh God, my Jemma..."

"You must go now, Son of Coul," Heimdall rumbled, "back to your own place and time."

Once more, the blinding rainbow flared, and suddenly the three of them were standing among the trees just outside the Playground, Daniel and Jemma still clinging together. He swayed on his bad leg, but she clutched at him, kept him from falling; unlike Coulson, who crash-landed heavily. Again.

"I don't think I like travelling Bifrost," Coulson mumbled queasily, getting to his feet. "Well, Mr Sousa, I think we probably have a lot to talk about... oh," as he saw how passionately Jemma and Daniel were kissing. He sighed, and headed for the Playground's doors. "Later."

**\*Chapter 24\*: Well Out Of My League (Angie Martinelli/Dum Dum...**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/DumWaitress\\_zps2pizy60b.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/DumWaitress_zps2pizy60b.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Living with Peggy was even more fun than Angie had ever imagined. Especially in Mr Stark's fancy mansion. It was a ten-minute bus ride to work through some of the nicest parts of New York, and sometimes Mr Jarvis even drove her in one of Mr Stark's fancy cars, if he was going her way.

Peggy wasn't much of a party girl, which was understandable with her job and all, but that didn't stop Angie trying to get her to go out and socialise once in a while. She walked in through the door one evening, spotted Peggy's coat already on the rack, and walked through towards the lounge calling;

"Hey English, please tell me you'll come out tonight? It's Saturday night and I haven't been dancing in *ages!*"

She heard Peggy's rich laugh, followed, to her surprise, by the sound of male laughter – more than one man, unless she very much missed her guess. Not just Mr Jarvis, then – perhaps Mr Stark had stopped by? Well Angie wasn't going to primp for *him*, no sirree, she knew all about Howard Stark. She wasn't going to fall for his charm. She passed by the hall mirror without a glance and pushed the lounge door open.

"Oh!"

Mr Stark was indeed there, she'd seen his picture in the papers enough times to recognise him instantly, and Mr Jarvis too, but there were about half a dozen other men in the room, all rising to their feet as she entered.

"Angie," Peggy stood too, came quickly to her side with a reassuring smile. "I'd like you to meet some friends of mine, who I served with in the war. The Howling Commandos, or some of them."

"Oh, my lord," Angie had to fight down the impulse to flee. Legends, heroes, she was meeting these men with her hair all over the place and a run in her stockings...

"*Enchanté, mademoiselle!*" the closest man bowed over her hand gallantly, and Angie couldn't help but smile.

"You must be Jacques Dernier," she said as he stood straight, and he smiled delightedly.

"*Oui, c'est vrai! Vous êtes aussi intelligent que vous êtes belle!*"

The handsome black man next to Dernier grinned. "He says that you're as intelligent as you are beautiful, Miss..."

"Where are my manners, I've been quite thrown by you all turning up out of the blue," Peggy said gaily. "This is my dear friend Angie Martinelli."

"Miss Martinelli. Gabe Jones, delighted to meet you."

Angie smiled shyly in return, and then the next man was stepping into Gabe's place.

"James Montgomery Falsworth, Miss Martinelli, but it's far too much of a mouthful, please call me Monty." He had an English accent, just like Peg's, which made Angie like him immediately.

"And you must all call me Angie," she said, "she's told me so many wonderful stories about you all, I feel that we're friends already."

Howard Stark elbowed his way in next, lifting her hand to kiss. Angie gave him a flat stare.

"Don't even think about it, Howard, I've told her lots of stories about you too," Peggy called dryly, and Howard sighed.

"A shame. All right, Peg, your gorgeous friend is off limits."

Angie found herself blushing just a little as Howard gave her a lingering look. Goodness. His charm was *lethal*. She could quite see why girls fell all over themselves, even knowing about his reputation.

The slim, good-looking Japanese man behind Howard bowed to her formally. "Jim Morita, Miss Martinelli."

“Angie, please,” she smiled at him. “Peggy said you’re from Fresno! I have a cousin living there, she got married and moved out west a couple years back.”

“I haven’t been home in longer than that, miss... Angie,” Jim replied with a wistful smile, “but if you give me your cousin’s name, I’ll surely be glad to look her up when I get back.”

Tim Dugan, last man in line, sighed a little impatiently. He’d been patiently waiting his chance to meet the beautiful blonde with the wide eyes and the sweet smile, and now she and Morita were gettin’ into a chat about California. He nudged Morita, not very politely.

“Give a fella a chance, Jim!”

“Dream on, Dum Dum, this lady’s out of your league,” Jim nudged him back with a snort, but he did move on, as Angie laughed shyly, a clear, soft sound.

“Any friend of Miss Union Jack is likely well out of my league,” Dugan agreed with a grin, “won’t stop me tryin’, though.”

Angie’s big blue eyes widened even further, her lips parted on an O. And then she let out a squeal of delight, and to Dugan’s astonishment, stepped forward and reached up to throw her arms around his neck.

“I *knew* it! I knew it had to be her!”

“My God, it’s you,” Dugan said, awed, gazing down at Angie smiling up at him, her eyes shining like stars.

“Miss Union Jack, indeed,” Angie giggled, “I *knew* it had to be Peggy. Who else could it possibly be?”

“So *that* was why she was so determined to befriend me,” Peggy said, enlightened, as Dugan held Angie close, gazing spellbound into her eyes.

“I’m sure it was your winning personality, Miss Carter,” Jarvis replied, and she shot him a withering look.

“Well, *I’m* happy for them both. Come on, let’s leave them alone.”

“No,” Dugan managed to tear his gaze from Angie’s, “I heard my girl sayin’ she wanted to go out dancin’. So dancing she shall get.”

Angie stared up at him adoringly. He was taller than her by a good six inches, massively broad-shouldered, thick curly blond hair and eyes bluer than the sky – and a finely groomed blond moustache. He was smiling down at her happily, a strong arm curved around her waist to hold her close.

“Your name isn’t really Dum Dum, is it?” she asked.

“Tim,” he admitted.

“That’s good. I’d feel a bit of a fool shoutin’ Dum Dum when I want to call you down to dinner.”

“Can you cook?” he asked hopefully.

“I’ll have you know I’m Italian, Tim,” her voice softened on his name, and he had to fight down the urge to kiss her right here in front of all the others. “You haven’t lived until you’ve tasted my *cannoli*.”

“I can vouch for that,” Peggy put in with a smile. “You’re a very lucky man, Dum Dum.”

“I certainly am,” a big, callused hand came up to lightly cup Angie’s soft cheek. “The luckiest guy in the world.”

## **\*Chapter 25\*: Into The Woods (Victor Creed/Daisy Johnson)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/SabreQuake\\_zps0iyduyut.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/SabreQuake_zps0iyduyut.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

"I'm so sorry," Daisy said weakly, watching as May swiftly bandaged the bullet hole in Hunter's arm.

"It wasn't your fault," May said automatically, but Hunter's expression told Daisy it wasn't true even before he spoke.

"Don't coddle her, May. You don't do her any favours. They were alerted when that stick cracked under her foot. We'd have been twenty feet closer if not for that."

May said nothing, focussed on pulling the bandage tight. "There's not been much time to train her in wilderness skills," she said finally, as close to an excuse as Daisy had ever heard her make.

"Time to fix that," Hunter said drily, "because next time the bullet might be a few inches higher and further to the right, and I'd rather keep my good looks, thank you."

Feeling horribly guilty that it was her mistake that caused Hunter to be wounded, Daisy threw herself into the training he and May organised for her with enthusiasm. A week later, they told her that they'd organised a 'graduation test' for her.

"Okay," she said a little warily. "Am I going to have to eat more bugs?"

Hunter grinned. "Maybe."

"Ugh."

"We're going to drop you off." May handed her a small backpack. "Make your way back to the Playground. On foot. No cheating."

"As if I would!" Daisy gave her an indignant look.

"I know. Hand over your phone. We've got a tracker on you so if you get horribly lost we'll come in and get you."

She made a face, but handed it over, and not very long after that she was standing in a forest clearing watching the quinjet lift back off into the sky.

"Okay," Daisy said to herself, "time to take stock."

The backpack turned out to contain a map, a compass, a full water canteen, a small rolled sleeping bag, and a rain poncho. Unfolding the map, she sighed at the sea of green. A small X drawn in red had 'Destination' written on it. She looked in vain for another marking.

"Damn."

It took her the rest of the day and climbing a mountain to figure out where she was. By the time she identified the peak on the map, the sun was dropping rapidly towards the horizon and Daisy realised she needed to find shelter. And food. It was fall, so there was a reasonably good chance of some berries, somewhere...

Dinner was a handful of berries and a few hazelnuts she cheated and quaked open. They didn't do much to quiet her growling stomach, but she'd need to be a lot hungrier than this before she'd kill and eat a rabbit like the little grey one she'd seen bounce across her path earlier.

Clearing a patch of ground, she set rocks to build a firepit, and held two pieces of wood together, grinning to herself as she vibrated them faster and faster. Smoke curled upwards quickly and she soon had a comforting little fire blazing. Banking it carefully, she wriggled into

her sleeping bag and settled in for the night.

The following morning, she set off almost as soon as she woke, only pausing to bury the remnants of her fire and stow her gear. The Playground was fifteen miles or so away over rough country; she might make it in a single day, but she'd need to move fast.

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Victor Creed lifted his head, sniffing the air, startled, as a very unfamiliar scent suddenly caught his attention. His lips curled back from his sharp teeth.

It had been a very long time since a human strayed into his hunting grounds. Well, he'd see the nosy bastard off, all right. People disappeared in the woods all the time and never came out.

Except... his nostrils flared. A *woman*. He grinned suddenly. *Well. Maybe he'd have a little fun with her first.* It had been a long, long time since he'd been with a woman. *Long time since I interacted with anyone. I'm a monster. Humanity doesn't want me, and I don't want them.*

He slipped away from the small cabin he'd built with his own two hands, not making a sound despite his size. It wasn't long before he caught sight of the woman - girl - he paused behind a tree, rather shocked. He'd expected a hunter, someone with a rifle, probably a hard-edged older woman. But this young, lovely girl wasn't even armed as far as he could see, nor was there any scent of gunpowder reaching his nostrils. A small hunting knife rode her belt, and she was practically dressed in tough cargo pants, hiking boots and a plain cotton T-shirt, a small backpack over her back. Her hair was pulled back from her face in a clip behind her head; it wasn't long, chin-length he guessed, a pretty shade of dark brown with lighter streaks.

She paused even as he stood watching, settled for a few moments on a fallen tree, taking out a water bottle and drinking, looking at a map and using a compass, making markings before packing her things away again and getting up.

The girl moved with an easy, economical grace, watching where she put her feet, regularly checking the compass in her hand and making slight adjustments to her direction. She paused a couple of times, foraging for food, Victor realised, as she plucked berries from bushes and ate them from her hand as she walked. He followed her silently, fascinated despite himself. *What was she doing? Where was she going, a beautiful young girl alone in the woods?* There were no recognised hiking trails anywhere close by.

Curious, he trailed after her, a tall, silent shadow among the trees.

It took Daisy a while to notice that the woodland creatures had fallen silent. She paused mid-stride, looking around. There was no sound but the sighing of the wind through the trees.

Predator nearby, she thought, remembering Hunter's lessons. *Bear, probably...* her hand tightened around the hunting knife before she laughed quietly at herself. *It'll be no threat to me if I move on quickly.* Still, she made herself release the knife, hold up her hands and send out a gentle wave of vibrations, feeling the reflections, looking for the bear...

There was something massive and alive behind a tree not too far away. But it wasn't in the direction she planned to go, so she didn't think she needed to worry. Walking on again quickly, she didn't slow her pace for a good fifteen minutes.

Victor stood stunned for a few moments, until after she was out of sight. And then, jaw set, he started after her again, even more careful to make no sound, nor let his scent drift to her on the breeze. Because she had powers, which meant she was a mutant, which meant the X-Men were looking for him again.

The back of Daisy's neck prickled. And the birds were still silent, except for the occasional alarm call. Now she came to think of it, that massive creature behind that tree really hadn't felt quite like a bear - not that she was quite sure what a bear would feel like - spinning around suddenly, she flung out her hands again, sending out a slightly stronger wave of vibration.

There!

The next wave of vibration was designed to incapacitate *whatever* it was, send it flying - but *it* was no longer there. And then a massive hand curled around her throat from behind and lifted her off her feet.

She would have screamed, except she couldn't get a sound out. A rough, harsh male voice growled in her ear "What's a little girl like you doing all alone in the woods?"

Daisy's eyes widened with shock. She had to make him let go, she *had* to... she grabbed onto a thick wrist with both hands and sent a sharp wave of vibration through it.

"Looking for the asshole who calls grown women little girls," she gasped out as his grip loosened. She fully expected him to drop her, but he didn't; his arm jerked and tightened again, something sharp nicked her throat - and then he *did* drop her.

She was higher in the air than she'd thought - *how big is this asshole anyway?* - fell to her knees as she stumbled, twisted around, her hands already coming up. And then she paused as her eyes met those of a *huge* guy, standing calmly there looking down at her, licking a drop of her blood off a long, brutally sharp-looking fingernail - was that a *claw*? She gaped up at him.

The girl - no, the *woman*, *his* woman, his *soulmate* - stared up at him, soft lips parted, dark brown eyes very wide. Victor licked his claw again, *tasting* her, her blood, her sweat. She tasted like *perfection*. Addictive. He had to rein himself in, the instinct to push her down, to taste all of her, warring with the realisation that he'd already frightened her. Slowly, he lowered his hand to his side and dropped to his knees, trying to make himself smaller, less threatening. She had a small hand flung up towards him, shaking slightly, and he reached out to touch her small, slim fingers very gently with his own.

"What's your name?" he rumbled quietly.

She stared at him from wide, spooked eyes - but she didn't look frightened, and there was no fear scent on her. Just a look of concern coming over her face.

"Daisy," she said finally, "Daisy Johnson, please, I can help you - did you take fish oil tablets?"

"What?" he blinked at her in surprise, as she leaned forward, wrapping her little fingers around his.

"Before you changed. Was it the fish oil tablets, or something else? How long ago?" Daisy leaned closer, looking at his eyes. His pupils were slit like a cat's, bright green, and his teeth were too sharp to be fully human.

Victor cocked his head, staring at her. "I've been this way for over a hundred and fifty years," he said quietly. "I was born like this."

"What?" it was Daisy's turn to blink in surprise. "You weren't exposed to Terrigen?"

"Ah," suddenly he understood. "No. No, I'm not Inhuman. I'm X-gene."

Daisy stared at him, at *her soulmate*. He was massive, he'd towered above her before dropping to his knees. She suspected he was even bigger than Mack. He had short, untidily clipped brown hair, thick stubble and a squarish, handsome face set off by those spectacular eyes.

He was *very* attractive to her sensibilities. She took a deep breath and realised that was a mistake when she caught his scent, a woodsy, musky scent that made heat coil through her body,

moisture well between her legs. His nostrils flared and she realised he was probably scenting her arousal. His eyes hooded, lips parting, and he ran his tongue over his lower lip slowly.

"I don't even know your name," she managed to gulp out, her eyes still locked with his.

"Victor. Victor Creed." He leaned closer to her, his slitted pupils flared, almost completely round. "I can *taste* you on the air," he whispered. "So sweet, my Daisy..."

She shuddered at his possessive tone, swayed towards him unconsciously, and a second later his arm had snapped around her, taken her down to the ground, pinned her beneath his powerful body.

The moan that escaped Daisy was pure arousal, making Victor growl in his throat just before he took her mouth with his own, plundering, *possessing*. She moaned again, clutching at his shoulders, pulling him closer. Legs wrapping around his waist.

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"Phil!" May burst into his office, and Coulson looked up from his desk, startled. "We've picked Sk-Daisy up on approach, she's been hurt..."

"What?" Phil was up and running almost at once. Daisy was two days later than May and Hunter had predicted she'd arrive back, he'd been worried sick, and it seemed that his worries might well have been justified.

"Hunter and Mack went out to meet her..."

Phil got to the main doors of the Playground just as the three came out of the trees. Daisy was pushing the two men off, insisting that she was *fine*, *no*, Mack you can *not* carry me.

She didn't look fine, to Phil's horrified eyes. Her clothes were badly ripped, barely retaining her modesty. Her hair a tangled mess, deep red bruises across her neck and chest that looked - oddly like love bites, actually.

"What the hell *happened* to you?" it was Bobbi who exclaimed it, having come up behind May and Coulson while they stared.

Daisy's smile was radiant. "I met my soulmate."

"Oh," Hunter said in suddenly enlightened tones, "well that explains *everything*."

"Where *is* he, then?" Bobbi asked curiously.

"We thought I should come on ahead. Make sure you guys didn't freak out or anything when he turned up, since you know he's with me now." Her smile was still radiant, and Phil found himself smiling along with her.

"Well, tell him to come on in. I'm delighted to meet your soulmate, Daisy," he told her honestly. While he was a little concerned about her physical state, he'd seen the aftermath of soulmates meeting for the first time before. And considering that their first meeting was out in the wilderness - well, it could be worse.

Daisy had turned, was making a beckoning gesture towards the trees. Despite the forewarning, May still went instinctively for her gun when a giant of a man stepped out of the treeline and came striding towards them.

"Holy shit," Hunter and Bobbi breathed in unison.

Mack only stared, and sighed as Daisy sprinted towards the man, leaped up into his arms and started kissing him as though they'd been parted for weeks instead of only a few minutes. "I guess I'd better lay in a supply of bleach."

May slowly eased her gun back into its holster and looked up at Mack, her lips twisting in a wry smile. "Forget the bleach, Mack. Get *napalm*."

## **\*Chapter 26\*: Hydra Hottie (Darcy/Bakshi)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Darkshi\\_zpsuoveeclw.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Darkshi_zpsuoveeclw.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

“You just... just... wait until Thor hears about this!” Darcy shouted impotently after Ian as the cell door closed behind him with a final-sounding *clang*.

A derisive laugh was her answer, followed by “You just sit tight now, Darcy girl. The boss will be along to speak to you in a bit.”

“Well isn’t this just peachy,” she muttered to herself as the sound of Ian’s boots faded away. Looking around the cell, her shoulders dropped further. It was almost bare, only a thin pad of a mattress on a shelf extruded from the wall, a basic toilet and tiny sink, both metal and firmly attached to the wall. Nothing she could use as a weapon.

She circled the cell a few times, trying furiously to pace out some of her frustration. How could she not have guessed *something* was off about Ian? He’d been far too competent, too smart; but then she’d never had an intern before, and after he saved her life from the Dark Elves it had never occurred to her not to trust him. Right up until the moment she’d been watching with shocked horror as Captain America and friends crashed three helicarriers into the Potomac.

“This is *awful*,” she’d turned to Ian, sitting beside her on the couch watching the television just as intently as she was.

“It is,” he nodded slowly, looking back at her. “Such a waste. Well, it was good while it lasted, Darcy.”

Her brow furrowed with puzzlement as he reached his right hand to his left wrist, tugged out the button on his watch and stabbed a needle into the back of her hand before she could so much as open her mouth to scream.

She’d woken up being carried over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Her whole body felt weak, she could barely move, and seconds later she’d been unceremoniously dumped on the floor of the cell where she was now trapped and alone.

“Bollocks.” Moodily, she slumped down onto the bed after pacing the cell a few more times, wincing as her buttocks encountered the hard shelf through the thin latex. “Bollocks, shit and *fuck*.”

“Language, Miss Lewis!” a male voice with a crisp English accent startled her, and she shot to her feet.

There was a man outside the cell door. A little above average height, impossibly handsome, with a smoothly tamed head of black curls, olive skin, black eyes that gleamed with amusement as he looked at her. He was wearing an immaculate suit, obviously tailor-made to fit him, emphasizing broad shoulders and a narrow waist. Ian stood right beside him, fading into insignificance beside the other man’s sheer charisma.

Any verbal filters Darcy might have possessed completely eliminated by her rage, she snapped; “Pity they didn’t send *you* to seduce me instead, Hydra Hottie, I might actually have enjoyed it.”

Ian’s face twisted with rage – and a completely different emotion came across the Hydra Hottie’s face, one Darcy couldn’t interpret at all. He murmured something to Ian that she didn’t

hear, but that made her *ex-boyfriend* stiffen to attention before turning and walking swiftly away.

“That wasn’t an offer,” Darcy realised suddenly that her verbal jab at Ian might have been taken literally by his Hottie boss.

“I didn’t think it was.” He was still staring at her from those midnight eyes, seemed to be waiting for something. A door closed somewhere in the distance and he brought a remote out of his pocket, pointed it at the camera dome on the ceiling and clicked a button.

“Did you just turn that off?” Darcy blinked, suddenly feeling frightened, as he next brought out keys and unlocked the cell door. She backed into the corner, as far away from him as she could get.

“I need to show you something.” He peeled off his suit jacket, slung it over his arm. Unfastened his tie and began to unbutton his crisp white shirt.

“I’ve seen it before, I th...” she trailed off, her eyes opening very, very wide as she stared, utterly shocked, at the black words scribbled across his abdomen, just below the curve of some very nicely defined pectoral muscles.

“I’m afraid it’s what’s called a self-fulfilling prophecy,” he murmured, and Darcy snapped her gaze up to his face. “I can’t say the idea really appealed to me once I discovered what Hydra actually do, but if I ever wanted to meet you...”

“Oh, *fuck*,” she said disgustedly.

“And I daresay my words to you have caused you to develop a habit of swearing at complete strangers in the hopes of meeting me.”

He wasn’t approaching closer, was standing halfway across the cell with his shirt half-open looking quite distressingly attractive. Darcy hesitated, staring at him.

“I don’t even know your name,” she said plaintively at last.

“It’s Sunil. Sunil Bakshi.”

“Sunil,” she tried the name out, discovered that she liked it. He smiled, showing a dimple in his cheek – *so* not fair, how *dare* he be that attractive? “So,” Darcy tried to keep her voice steady, though she suspected she was failing miserably, “I’d rather not go over to the dark side even if you do have cookies, so what happens now?”

He considered that for a moment, smile fading. “I can’t just walk out of here with you, I’m afraid. Even though I’m senior in this facility, there would be too many questions asked. So I’ll anonymously tip off your friends as to your location and they can stage a rescue.”

“Make sure you’re far away,” Darcy said impulsively, “Thor can get messy when he’s mad...”

“I shall.” His smile turned a little crooked. “I’ll find you, Darcy. I’ll have to extricate myself from Hydra, and it won’t be easy, especially not now. The world just got a whole lot messier without SHIELD to police it, as I’m sure you realise.”

She hadn’t really had time to *begin* to process the political implications, but it was so obviously true that she nodded anyway. They stood staring at each other in silence for several long moments before Sunil seemed to shake himself out of his trance.

“I’ll have to go now. I’ll make sure nobody comes into the cell block tonight, Darcy; you should be out of here before dawn anyway. Stay safe, hm?”

“Sunil,” Darcy said as he buttoned his shirt back up, reknotted his tie, “be careful.”

His handsome face softened, hard lines of tension around his eyes smoothing away, and he took a small step towards her without even seeming to realise it. She met him halfway, smiling up at him a little nervously as he lifted a hand to caress her cheek.

"I'll come to you as soon as I can," he promised quietly, before bending his head and kissing her, slow and sensual. Darcy's eyelids fluttered closed, her lips parted under his tongue's gentle pressure, and she swayed into him, thoroughly enjoying the kiss until he pulled back at last, pressing another kiss lightly on her forehead.

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Ian was found dead in the ruins of the facility, Darcy heard later, with a neat bullet hole in the centre of his forehead. And since Thor had called in Sif and the Warriors Three to take the place down and rescue her, somehow she didn't think any of them had taken to using Glocks.

Thor decided to relocate to Avengers Tower in New York, since the other Avengers were congregating there. Thor couldn't take too much of Stark, but with Cap, Barton and Romanoff no longer working for SHIELD they proved an adequate buffer. Jane spent half her time travelling anyway now, going to lectures and conferences, and since Thor didn't care for aeroplanes he preferred not to be alone and bored when she was away.

Frankly, Thor alone and bored was a Bad Thing in anyone's books, so Darcy was more than happy that he had his superhero playmates to keep him entertained while she travelled the world with Jane, keeping her scientist organised and in the correct location at the appropriate times. Sometimes she thought of Sunil, of his promise to find her when he'd extricated himself from Hydra's tentacles – she laughed mirthlessly at the thought. But then, he could always leave a message with Thor.

Darcy was sitting alone at a pavement café in Madrid, watching the world go by while Jane gave yet another lecture, when a man slipped into the seat opposite her. She opened her mouth to tell him she wasn't interested... and left it open.

"You'll catch flies," Sunil said in amusement.

Darcy shut her mouth with a snap, staring at him, drinking him in with her eyes. He was dressed casually, grey jeans and a white T-shirt that looked fabulous with his colouring, his black curls looser, a few tumbling down over his forehead towards his eyes. He smiled at her, a slow, appreciative smile that flashed his dimple and made the corners of his midnight eyes crinkle up adorably.

"You're here," she said at last, wanted to kick herself for sounding like a complete nitwit. He didn't seem to care about her inanity, though, just reached across the table to take her hand, rubbing his thumb over her knuckles lightly.

"I am. I'm sorry it took a while. I had to extricate myself and build a new identity. I sent all the information I had on Hydra to Stark in an information dump yesterday."

Darcy's mouth fell open again. "So *that's* why Thor called last night and said they were going on mission and not to worry Jane..."

"Did he? I expect there'll be a lot of mess all over the TV in a few hours, then, if they're moving that quickly." His smile was vindictive and very satisfied. "As long as they get that bastard Whitehall. He's got a SHIELD agent tied to a frame in his office trying to brainwash the poor woman."

"I'm sure they will," Darcy said. She sat and looked at him for a minute, still trying to take in the fact that he was really here with her, this beautiful man, her *soulmate*. "So – what happens now?" she asked hesitantly at last.

Sunil smiled again at her. "That's up to you, Darcy." He was still holding her hand, the tip of his thumb tracing patterns over the back of it gently. "It always will be."

***Chapter 27*: If Found Please Return (Loki/Maria Hill)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/TrickHill_zpswtq2gd3i.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Lady Jane, look who I found on Asgard!”

Jane’s mouth fell open as she stared at Loki, who gave her a rather tentative smile. “Hello again, Dr Foster.”

Maria watched in amazement as Jane rushed across the lab and gave Loki a hearty smack across the face.

“What was that for this time?” the Trickster demanded with a half-smile.

“Letting Thor think you were dead, you insensitive oaf!” Jane half-shouted at him, before reaching out and hugging him around the waist, her head not even reaching his shoulder. “He *cried*,” she mumbled against Loki’s chest.

Loki patted Jane’s head rather gingerly. “I’m sorry, Dr Foster. I – wanted to give Thor the freedom to be with you, if he so chose.” He looked around as though hunting for an escape route, and his eyes fell on Maria. A slight frown creased his high, pale brow.

He’s trying to place me, Maria thought. They’d seen each other once before; she’d been one of very few allowed into the outer containment room on the Helicarrier, and she hadn’t been able to resist going in to have a look. Their eyes had met for the briefest of instants, but she could never forget that piercing blue gaze.

Except... his eyes were *green*. Clearly and distinctly, emerald-green.

“Welcome back, Thor,” Maria said absently as Thor greeted her with his usual exuberant gallantry. Eyes still locked with Loki’s, she asked “This is definitely your brother, you’re quite sure of it?”

“Aye, there can be no mistake.” Thor was clearly overjoyed about it, too.

“But his eyes were blue!”

“Ah,” Thor nodded sadly. “Yes, the influence of the Mindstone was upon him then. I knew he would never willingly have done what he did otherwise; it was not until just recently that Loki told me the truth, though, when I told him that the Mindstone had been recovered and is now safe in Vision’s keeping.”

“Oh.” Maria didn’t know what to think, to that. She’d talked to both Clint and Helen Cho, both of whom had been controlled by the Mindstone. They had both had described it as an awful experience, like being trapped in a glass prison inside your own mind, watching helplessly as your skills were bent to the will of another. She didn’t hold their actions against them, either of them. So – she supposed she had to forgive Loki, too.

Loki was moving away from Jane, who came rushing over to Thor then, leaping into his arms and plastering her mouth to his. Maria watched as Loki came over to her, walking with a long, easy stride, his long green cape flowing around him. *Magnificent*, she couldn’t help but acknowledge silently. Like Thor, it was easy to see how men had once worshipped these beings as gods.

“I believe we have met before,” Loki began, stopping in front of her, “and as I do not recall exactly when or where, I believe it must have been last time I came to Midgard. In which

case, I almost certainly owe you an apology. I wronged everyone I met then, I fear.”

Maria had intended to say that it wasn’t his fault, but the words that came out of her mouth instead were; “You killed my best friend.”

“Do you refer to the Son of Coul, the man with a habit of not staying dead?” Loki cocked his head, wondering if all Midgardian women were so fiercely defiant in the current day and age. He was beginning to agree with Thor that it was actually rather appealing. Except they seemed to have a most unladylike habit of slapping one to indicate their disapproval...

...his head rocked with the force of the punch.

Working his jaw, Loki blinked down at Maria, astounded by the force such a slender, delicate-looking woman had put behind the blow. She could *really* throw a punch. A moment later the completely different kind of pain in his chin registered and his green eyes flew wide, even as Maria started back, staring at her hand, at the runes etching themselves in across her knuckles.

“What the *fucking hell* is that?” she gasped.

“Unexpected,” was all Loki could say as he stared at the Jotunn runes spelling out his name and lineage on her fingers. She looked up at him, blue eyes widening even further, and he wondered what the marks on his chin indicated.

Thor and Jane had separated, and the next thing they heard was Thor’s booming laughter. “Ah, brother, a fine match for you! The Lady Hill will lead you around by the nose and no mistake!”

Jane was giggling too, and he could see his soulmate’s lips beginning to twitch with amusement. Unable to resist any longer, Loki conjured an illusory mirror to see what mark he had been branded with.

If found, please return to Maria Hill.

***Chapter 28*: An Interesting Grasp Of Language (Fury/Sif)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20FurySif_zps11hcn2c4.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“I am getting so fucking pissed off with motherfucking HYDRA!” Fury slammed into the Avengers’ conference centre without even bothering to knock. “All these motherfucking heads keep fucking growing back!”

Sif watched the tall, dark-skinned, one-eyed man with interest. “He has an interesting grasp of language,” she remarked to Thor.

“Who the ever-loving-fuck is she?” Fury suddenly noticed the dark-haired woman sitting beside Thor. And the handle of the big-ass sword sticking up above her shoulder.

“The Lady Sif, a boon companion of mine and one of Asgard’s finest warriors,” Thor replied, “Lady Sif, this is the Furious One of whom you have heard me speak.”

“Ah, the deposed leader of SHIELD,” Sif said, enlightened.

“I was not deposed, I... it’s complicated!” Fury glared at her. She smiled.

“That is a very fine one-eyed glare, oh Furious One. Almost on a par with Odin’s, and he has had millennia to practice. I congratulate you.”

Despite himself, Fury’s lips twitched with amusement. “Thank you, my lady. I will take

that as a compliment.”

“It was intended as such. Thor has told me of your leadership. You are having problems with a hydra? I have killed several such, if I may lay my sword at your service.”

A glint appeared in Fury’s eye. “Maybe that’s where I’ve been going wrong,” he murmured thoughtfully, “maybe a literal cutting-off of heads would actually serve as a really good object lesson...”

“If you cut the heads off and cauterize them, they don’t grow back,” Sif offered helpfully.

“I like the way you think.”

The heads of the other occupants of the room were swivelling back and forth like spectators at a tennis match. Sif stood gracefully, vaulted over the table, and grinned over her shoulder at Thor.

“I shall return when I have aided the Furious One in his noble quest to rid the world of this Hydra, my prince!”

“They might be gone quite a long time,” Natasha said into the stunned silence that fell as the door slammed behind the pair.

“I have a really, really bad feeling about this,” Maria Hill said in doom-laden tones.

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“Where is this hydra located, oh Furious One?” Sif asked cheerfully.

“It’s not a hydra in the sense you’re thinking, my lady. And please call me... call me Nick.” He *liked* her, and she was about a millennia older than he was, despite her youthful appearance. He couldn’t exactly ask her to call him Sir.

“Then you must call me Sif.”

“I’m honoured.” He meant it, and she heard the genuine sentiment in his tone, inclined her head to him with a smile.

“I am glad to lay my sword at your service, Nick. No matter what our enemy.” She offered her hand for him to clasp, and he blinked at it for a second before smiling back at her and reaching out.

Both accustomed to pain, neither cried out even as agony seared through their palms. Sif’s grip tightened, almost crushing Nick’s fingers, but he didn’t look away from her grey eyes, the pupils flared with shock.

“I have been searching for you for a very, very long time,” she breathed softly.

He looked at the runes twining around both their hands as she released her grip; she kept her fingers tangled with his, though. “Does this mean what I think it means? I’ve seen the marks on Thor’s arm and Jane Foster’s hand...”

“Aye, we are soulmates, even as they are.” Her smile was so lovely, he thought wistfully.

“I’m sorry.”

“For what?” Sif blinked, surprised.

“I’m old, Sif. The best years of my life are long gone. I’m no fit mate for someone like you, beautiful and damn near immortal...”

She smiled at him, half-laughed. “You think I’m beautiful?”

“You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” Nick Fury had told a great many lies in his life, but he had no need for any of his skills at dissembling now, and her smile broadened.

“Idunn is one of my closest friends. All I will need to do is say the word and she will gift me one of her apples. You will live a thousand years yet at my side, Nick, and all you will have

to do to keep me happy is to keep looking at me as you do right now.”

His smile broadened to match hers. “That’s not going to be difficult *at all*.”

Sif was the one who leaned in to kiss him, still smiling. “Then let us go, Nick, and kill this hydra of yours.” She looked up at him through half-lowered lashes. “I have a great desire to be done with this task and find a place where we can be alone.”

His smile was wry and weary. “Oh, beautiful. I think we’d better put that the other way about. But then, if I’ve got a thousand years to cut all the heads off Hydra, I might actually get it done this time.”

“Well,” she smirked, lacing her fingers with his again, “if you are willing to defer, I shall certainly not object.”

Maria Hill stared out of the facility window, utterly stunned. “You know,” she remarked as Natasha walked up beside her, “I really thought I’d already seen pretty much everything. But spotting Nick Fury making out with a war goddess in the car park really does take the cake.”

## **\*Chapter 29\*: A Superhero Of My Own (Clint/Claire Temple)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/HawkNurse\\_zpsuu15cjl.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/HawkNurse_zpsuu15cjl.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

“Claire,” there was a frantic knocking at her door. “Claire!”

She groaned and dragged herself off the couch. It had been a long, long night in the ER, a double shift, a full moon which meant the weirdos were out in force. But the knocking and the voice at her door sounded urgent.

“Santino,” she said on a sigh, leaning on the doorframe.

*“¡Lo siento, pero hay otro hombre en su contenedor de basura!”* Santino babbled, and she cursed under her breath.

*“¿No es Matt?”* she checked.

*“¡No! ¡Otro hombre!”*

“Shit,” she said, aloud this time. Santino gave her a pathetic look. “Okay, I’m coming, I’m coming, hang on.” She scrabbled for her shoes, tugged them on. Hurried down the steps after the boy.

It wasn’t Matt Murdock. It was another superhero, and this one she recognised; she’d seen his face on national TV. He wasn’t in costume, though, was wearing only a pair of grey trackpants and a torn purple T-shirt, his feet bare. Perhaps that was why Santino hadn’t recognised him, Claire thought, glancing sideways at the teenager, seeing his incurious expression.

Well, leaving Hawkeye unconscious in the dumpster really wasn’t an option. She debated calling Jessica, for a brief moment. Someone with superstrength would come in handy right about now. Hawkeye wasn’t overly tall but he was solidly muscled.

However, considering the time of night, Jessica was highly likely to be drunk, in bed with Luke, or both. Claire sighed and squared her shoulders.

“All right,” she climbed up and into the dumpster, wrinkling her nose at the disgusting smell as bags squished under her feet. “Let’s have you out of here, buddy. Santino, you grab his legs.”

Claire checked Hawkeye over quickly once they had him on the ground; he didn't seem to be bleeding anywhere but there was a spectacular lump on his temple. She felt around it nervously.

"If you've got impenetrable skin too, I'm so fucking done," she told the unconscious man.

"¿Por que?" Santino looked at her oddly.

"Never mind. Come on."

One arm over each of their shoulders, they hauled him up to Claire's apartment and dumped him on the couch. Santino hovered nervously by the door until Claire waved him out with a thank-you, and then he fled like a nervous rabbit, the door banging shut behind him.

"So," Claire said, looking down at the unconscious superhero on her couch with a sigh, "let's see what's up with you, then."

She retrieved some ice from her freezer, wrapped it in a cloth and bound it carefully to the lump on his brow before looking the rest of him over. He was barefoot, and his feet were scratched and cut, filthy too, so she fetched some water and Betadine to clean them up. Considering them, she decided at last to bandage them as well. If he was anything like Matt or Jessica, he'd be up and running for the door the second he was conscious, and he really shouldn't run on those feet.

Turning her attention to his legs once his feet were bandaged, Claire felt around all the joints through his trackpants, slid her hands over the long bones. She couldn't feel anything out of place, but she'd have to wait for him to be conscious to check if he had any pain to be sure.

Moving on up to his chest, she discovered that the purple T-shirt was badly gashed across his stomach, almost hanging off. With a feeling of sudden dread, she pushed it up. If he had a gut wound - but there was nothing, only some rather perfect abdominal muscles.

With some scribbled black writing across them.

Claire read the words with a sudden sense of impending doom. *If you've got impenetrable skin too, I'm so fucking done.*

"Oh, fuck me *sideways*," she said aloud.

"Language," a raspy voice murmured, and she looked up, startled, to meet a pair of blue-grey eyes peering back at her.

"What?"

"Not that I wouldn't like to take you up on the offer because hot damn, have you *seen* you?"

Claire blinked, having the confusing feeling that she'd just stumbled into some sort of parallel dimension, and said "What?" again.

"You're gorgeous, and considering that you've got your hands all over my abs, I think I'd better introduce myself - I'm Clint Barton."

"I *know* who you are!" Cheeks burning, she snatched her hands off his stomach. "You're *Hawkeye*."

He grimaced. "Well, technically, yes."

"Technically?" She sat back on her heels and gave him an incredulous look.

"I'm on leave."

"Avengers get to go on leave?"

He gave her a weary smile. "Sokovia was pretty rough."

"Oh..." she remembered now, seeing the footage of the young blond speedster the media

had dubbed Quicksilver, dying in a hail of bullets protecting Hawkeye and a child. “I - I’m sorry.”

“S’alright. Well, it’s not, but - I’m gettin’ past it.” He shrugged a thickly muscled shoulder, winced. Jerked back to her senses, Claire frowned.

“What just hurt?”

“Everything?” He tried to push himself up to a sitting position. Claire shoved him down firmly.

“No you don’t. I’m a nurse.”

He took her in with one quick glance, flicked a second around her apartment and returned his gaze to her face with one eyebrow eloquently raised.

“This is not the first time I’ve found an unconscious superhero in my dumpster,” Claire confessed, and he barked out a short laugh before groaning and pressing against his ribs.

“The dumpster. Shit, I remember now. The Russians!”

“Please tell me they’re not more Ranskahovs!”

Clint blinked, several times. “Not to my knowledge,” he said slowly. “The Ranskahovs dropped off the map a few months back. How do you...?”

“It’s a long story which started with that other superhero I found in my dumpster.”

“Which sounds *terribly* interesting.” He looked at her expectantly, and when she said no more, changed tack. “So what were you swearing a blue streak about when I woke up?”

That was an even more uncomfortable question, but lying to him about it really wasn’t an option. Taking a deep breath, Claire stood up and tugged up the hem of her T-shirt.

Clint’s eyes went very wide as he stared at the single word scrawled almost illegibly over smooth golden skin. *Language*.

“So,” he said slowly, “that other guy in the dumpster had impenetrable skin?”

Claire winced. “No. That’s another friend of mine. I... seem to be afflicted with superheroes.”

Clint went very quiet before saying “You know there isn’t actually anything super about me, right? I’m just pretty good with a bow.” He tried to push himself to sit up again, and Claire dropped the hem of her T-shirt and leaned over, pressing on his shoulders lightly.

“Don’t, Clint, you’re hurt!” The ice pack slipped off his head and she grabbed it, put it back. “There’s a huge lump on your head, and the way you’re moving, you’ve got at least a couple of cracked ribs.”

He grinned up at her. “You really are a nurse. Excellent assessment.”

She couldn’t help but smile back at him. “And *you* really are going to be trouble. I can just tell.”

He caught at her hand, brought it to his lips, kissed her fingertips lightly. “I still don’t know your name, oh sweet damsel who makes a habit of rescuing idiots with hero complexes from her dumpster.”

“Claire,” she said, smiling wider. “It’s Claire Temple.”

“That’s pretty.” He reached out, touched her cheek gently. “You’re pretty. Too pretty for a beat-up old hack like me.”

“Oh, don’t you dare start with that.” She rolled her eyes, but she didn’t pull away from the touch of his calloused fingertips. Her own curled around his wrist, tentative at first, but then firmer. “It seems the universe has been afflicting me with superheroes in preparation for getting one of my very own.”

"I told you, I'm not a superhero."

Leaning down, she kissed him lightly before telling him "Yes, Clint. You are."

### **\*Chapter 30\*: A Scavenging Hero (Bucky Barnes/Claire Temple)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20/WinterNurse\\_zpstgelqllz.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20/WinterNurse_zpstgelqllz.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Claire burst out laughing as Trish finished her story. She had a low, throaty chuckle that was almost drowned out by Jessica's raucous cackle and Karen's joyous peals of laughter, not that she cared.

"Let me get you another drink, Claire," Jessica stood and moved towards the bar, but Claire shook her head, putting a hand on her friend's wrist.

"I'm good, Jess, honestly. You might be rock-steady on your feet but I'm not nearly as hardened a drinker as you are and I have to work tomorrow, I'm on at six."

"You sure?" Jessica checked.

"I'm sure. Thanks, though."

"Stay a little longer?" Karen entreated with her sweet smile, and Claire smiled back.

"If Luke will pour me something non-alcoholic?" she said, her voice no louder than normal, and from the corner of her eye saw Matt raise a finger to Luke, speak to him. A few seconds later Foggy delivered her a glass of lemonade with several chunks of ice and a wedge of lime in it.

Claire sat back with the glass and smiled around at her friends. She'd never thought that getting mixed up with the superhero crowd would lead to her making three of the best female friends she'd ever had. And a bunch of male friends who all seemed to act like her overprotective big brothers, but that was definitely secondary.

Karen swayed into Claire, who put a steadying arm around her shoulders. "Easy there, Red. I think you've had enough."

"Probably," Karen giggled, and then whispered loudly into Claire's ear, "Enough that I'm going to go home with Foggy again tonight."

"Don't know why you don't just bite the bullet and move in with him," Trish slurred, waving her glass in Karen's direction. "Foggy's a keeper."

"He hasn't invited me..."

All three of the other women, older and more worldly-wise than Karen, snorted at that.

"Foggy's not confident enough. He'd be convinced you'll say no," Jessica said. "Just move in. We'll help."

"Yeah, you can carry all the heavy boxes. At once," Trish teased, making them all laugh again.

Luke came over to the table, grinning. "Well, I can hear you ladies are all having a wonderful time, but I gotta stop serving drinks now."

"Awww," Jessica complained.

"I've got another bottle for us upstairs, sugar," he consoled her, slipping an arm around her waist. which made her smile a little bashfully, still embarrassed about open displays of affection in front of others.

"I've got to go, anyway," Trish sighed. "I'm on air tomorrow." She stood, tottering

slightly. Matt moved up silently behind her and put a steadying hand under her elbow. "Foggy, Karen, you want to share a cab, as far as your place?"

"Um, sure," Foggy said with a bemused smile as Karen weaved her way over to him and put her arms around his neck, smiling happily up at him. "Sounds good..."

"I'll walk you home, Claire," Matt offered as they headed for the door.

"I'm sure you've got something else to be doing?" she offered him a quizzical glance. "And my apartment's in the opposite direction to yours. It's only two blocks."

"There is a new sweatshop I was thinking of checking out," he confessed, a little sheepishly.

"Go, then." She leaned up and kissed his cheek affectionately. "I'll be fine, Matt. You'll hear if I'm not anyway. Go suit up."

He knew her well enough by now not to argue. Just smiled at her and turned away, disappearing almost instantly into a darkened alley. She really didn't want to see him scaling a wall like a spider, so she turned her back as well and headed back towards her apartment.

Some women might have been nervous about walking alone through Hell's Kitchen, but Claire Temple, nurse and friend to superheroes, walked with calm, unhurried confidence, her head held high. Shadows in alleys, who might have approached had she looked like an easy victim, held their peace.

She was just walking up to her building when a noise to her left alerted her. Claire glanced into the alley with a jaundiced eye; at least it wouldn't be Matt in her dumpster this time.

There was a homeless guy scavenging in it instead. Ordinarily, she'd have put her head down and walked on, but she recognised the container of food he'd just pulled open.

And she was more than a little bit drunk.

"Oh God no, don't eat that!" Claire exclaimed, hurrying down the alley, grabbing the container out of the guy's hand. She hurled it back into the dumpster and tugged on his arm. "Come on upstairs. I should have thrown out that leftover Thai a week ago, I just found it mouldering in the back of the fridge this morning."

The homeless guy - who was a hell of a lot bigger and more cut than most of the hobos she saw around Hell's Kitchen - stared down at her from bright blue eyes as she opened the door to the building.

"Where are you taking me?" he asked in a low, soft voice.

Claire startled, looked up at him. "I... food. I can do better than dumpster food," she said, only then realising that she was about to take a completely unknown man up to her apartment.

A man who'd just said her soulmate words.

"I don't suppose you have a long rambling spiel about leftover Thai food written on you somewhere?" she asked a little dismally. *Just my luck to find my soulmate scavenging for his dinner in my dumpster...*

He nodded gravely, those amazing eyes fixed on hers. "I'm sorry," he said unexpectedly.

"No, no, don't be - don't be sorry." With a sigh, she started up the stairs. "Come on, then. Let me fix you something to eat."

"You shouldn't invite me up," he said, "I could be dangerous."

Claire turned on the steps, looking down at him, taking in his size, the breadth of his shoulders, the black leather gloves on his hands. "I have no doubt you are. Do you intend to hurt me?"

"Never."

The single word was said with such heartfelt sincerity that she smiled at him for the first time. "Then you'd better come on up. Do you like *fajitas*?"

"I don't know," was the response, the tone almost apologetic, "but I should like to try it."

Claire stared at him. "Where the hell are you from? That's a Brooklyn accent and you don't *know* if you like fajitas?"

"It's a long story."

"What's your name?" she thought to ask then. "I'm Claire."

He hesitated for a long moment before saying "James." And then he smiled, showing even and surprisingly white teeth. "It's very nice to meet you, Claire." Holding out his hand, he clearly expected her to take it, and when she did, startled her completely by lifting it to his lips for a kiss.

In her entire life, nobody, but *nobody*, had ever made such a gesture to Claire Temple, not with any sincerity, and certainly not with the sheer, unaffected ease that James did. Her whole demeanour softened, and she laughed, the carefree tones of a young girl.

"You're a charmer, I see. Come on up then, James. Let's find out whether you like *fajitas* or not."

### **\*Chapter 31\*: Blue On Blue (Loki/Nebula)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20Nebuloki\\_zpsabgacagq.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20Nebuloki_zpsabgacagq.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Loki attempted to disguise his sigh of boredom as yet another delegate stood to address the assembled crowd of Important Notables from this quadrant of the galaxy. The seating arrangements had been bad enough; Sif had suggested just seating everyone in alphabetical order. Even Fandral had snorted with laughter at that one, pointing out that would mean Yandos and Yandira would be seated next to each other. Considering the ceasefire both sides were itching for an excuse to break, that would be one of the worse ideas in recent diplomatic history.

No, it had fallen to Loki to arrange seating, with subtlety and guile; Asgard was hosting this event and it was Asgard's place to decide who took precedence. Frigga had taught him well, he thought with sorrow-tinged pride as Odin gave him an approving nod on looking over the arrangements. This had once been a task of Frigga's, one which she had performed with the grace and brilliance that had characterised her reign as Odin's queen.

Loki knew Odin was thinking of Frigga too as his face turned sorrowful for a moment, but then he touched Loki on the shoulder and passed on by, smiling in welcoming greeting to Nova Prime.

*How did you hide your boredom at these interminable speeches, Mother?* Loki thought, fighting to stay upright and keep a faint, interested smile on his face as the delegate from Seti IV waffled on and on. *More importantly, how shall I?* He debated slapping on an illusion, but... no, best not. There were at least some races present who were sensitive to magic.

And then his attention was caught, as a slender form slipped between the seats, bent to whisper in the ear of a delegate, and darted gracefully out again a moment later.

She's *blue*. He blinked, thinking it was a trick of the light, because the being was too humanoid to be Kree, Jotunn - not that Jotunns were invited - Interdite, Pheragot, Sark - too

small to be Centaurian - she could be Levian but they were usually more turquoise... he craned his neck to get a glimpse of her as she passed into the brighter-lit hallway outside. Definitely blue, maybe even a bit on the purple side. *How intriguing.*

He looked for the blue girl again at the dinner that followed the interminable greeting ceremony, but didn't see her anywhere. It wasn't until he returned to his own quarters that he realised she must be an aide to a delegate rather than a delegate herself, and as such wouldn't be officially invited to the dinner. Frustrated, Loki decided to watch out for her in the coming days.

He caught a glimpse of her two days later, disappearing around a corner in the distance. Pursuing, unfortunately, was not an option as he was locked in the middle of a tricky negotiation with the Praxian delegate.

Early the following morning, he was sure he spotted her on the roof. Since he was in the courtyard at the time and lacked the ability to fly (thank you, Thor, for the regular reminders) there was little point in trying to reach her.

Three days later, the event was almost over, and Loki almost despairing at ever catching more than a fleeting glimpse of the elusive blue woman, when Fandral dropped into the chair beside him at the midday meal.

"You've been looking decidedly glum the last few days, my friend; decided that politics is not to your taste after all?" Fandral asked cheerfully.

"It's been very interesting, actually," Loki said truthfully, and then it occurred to him that the man sitting beside him seemed to be a magnet for females of any race. "Fandral - there's a woman here I am curious about. She's blue, and humanoid..."

Fandral shuddered dramatically. "Nebula! Odin's eye, Loki, steer clear of that one!"

"Why?" because suddenly he saw her, standing in the doorway. Never taking his eyes off her, Loki stood, fully intending to go over and speak to her.

"She's a Galaxy-class assassin, it's the worst-kept secret at the conference... Loki!"

Fandral stared at his friend's rapidly retreating back. "Well," he shrugged after a moment. "I suppose, if you like that sort of thing..."

~~~~~

She'd seen him watching her, of course. Nebula was aware of everything that went on around her, and Loki, Prince of Asgard, was hard to miss. The way everyone quieted when he was near, looked at him respectfully and listened when he spoke; that alone would have been enough, but he had a physical presence too. While his height was not excessive when compared with many races, he had a commanding mien and his green eyes were absolutely piercing, his face expressionate when he wanted it to be. To be the target of the Prince's displeasure was a formidable deterrent to bad behaviour, she thought.

Nebula grimaced when she saw him striding towards her. Her presence here was technically a breach of several interstellar diplomatic treaties, but she wasn't here to kill anyone. She was trying to give up that sort of thing. Play it straight, for the first time in her life. She certainly wasn't going to race back to Thanos' side now that Gamora and her odd bunch of friends had rid her of Ronan's leash.

"Lady Nebula," Loki's voice said not far behind her, and she sighed inwardly.

Dammit. I knew telling Fandral my name was a mistake.

Slowly, Nebula turned around, saw Loki just a few steps away. He wasn't all that much taller than she, only three or four inches, but he'd caught up with her easily, his strides long and

swift.

“Your Highness.” She offered him a courteous bow. “May I help you?”

He seemed strangely lost for words, just staring at her. Self-conscious about the scars on her face, about her cybernetic arm, Nebula began to feel defensive. When he had not spoken for a full two minutes, she snapped.

“What are you staring at?”

“The most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” His response was quick - and sincere.

For days she’d been watching him lie and double-talk, spin unpalatable truths and mouth insincere platitudes; the language of diplomacy, smooth and practised. The words he’d just said to her, though - they’d come from his heart. Shocked to the core, Nebula stared back at him.

“I’m...” she couldn’t think of what to say. Nobody, in the whole of her life that she could remember, had ever called her beautiful. Not before her scars and not after.

“You’re Lumphoid, aren’t you?” Loki said when she stopped and seemed lost for words. “I haven’t seen one of your kind in - three, four hundred years?”

“There are none of us left, save me. Galactus destroyed our homeworld. My father, my mother and my uncle were away on a diplomatic mission. Thanos killed them and took me for his adopted daughter.” She’d said it enough times that the words no longer hurt. They were just words. If she kept telling herself that, she thought, one day it might be true.

“Ahhh,” he nodded slowly. “*That* Nebula. I’ve heard of you, and your sister Gamora. Nobody told me, though, how beautiful you are.”

“You’re being ridiculous,” she snapped, certain now that he was mocking her. “Gamora’s the beauty in the family.”

“I prefer blue to green.” He looked down at his green robes, then, and grinned, as though realising how ridiculous he’d just made himself sound. “Would you honour me with your presence this evening, at dinner?”

She had absolutely no idea what mad impulse drove her to say yes.

~~~~~

That evening, a polite servant arrived at her quarters and indicated that she should follow him; biting on her lower lip uncertainly, Nebula followed. She felt even more uncertain when she realised she was being led into a restricted section of the palace. The royal family’s private suites.

The servant knocked at a door and backed away, bowing politely again before departing silently. Nebula debated just running for it - she who’d never run from a fight in her life - until the door opened slightly and she saw Loki standing there.

He was less formally clad than the state robes she’d seen him in all week, a white shirt with a black and silver waistcoat over it, plain black trews and boots. His silky dark hair fell smoothly to his shoulders, framing his pale face. Self-conscious about her own bald, burned scalp, Nebula looked a little enviously at that hair.

“Your Highness,” she said politely.

“Lady Nebula. Please.” He stepped back and gestured to her to step inside; closing the door behind her when she did so.

The room was simply set; an elegant wooden table with two chairs, some covered plates on the table. Soft lighting and fresh blooms in vases, releasing a potent, sensual scent into the air.

“I took the liberty of selecting a few dishes,” Loki said pleasantly, “I hope that you may

find something to tempt your appetite.”

She was the temptation, he thought, wearing a dress in a blue-violet fabric just a few shades darker than her amazing skin, softly clinging to her sinuous, lean body. Her long, slim throat was bared, but long sleeves clung to her arms and ended in thin gloves - of course, he remembered, one of them was cybernetic. Obviously she preferred to conceal it whenever she could, though she couldn't conceal her cybernetic eye.

“Why am I here?” she turned on him suddenly, huge black eyes flashing. “Do you think I am here on Asgard to kill someone? Is that what this is about? I'm not. I don't do that any more.”

“Indeed?” he looked at her with raised eyebrows. “That's interesting, but no, my lady, that's not why I invited you here.” Taking a deep breath, Loki tried to relax himself - and slowly let go of his illusions, the illusions he wore so constantly that he felt curiously naked without them.

Nebula's jaw dropped as the colour slowly flooded into his skin, as the ridges appeared on his brow and nose. As his eyes burned red.

“*Jotunn*,” she whispered, utterly shocked. “How - when...”

“A thousand years ago, and more, in the last war that Asgard fought with the Frost Giants, Odin found a child. A baby, abandoned to die in a temple. He chose to save the child, to bring him home, and Queen Frigga, may she ever rest in peace, raised me as her own, alongside Thor. My lady mother gifted me with her magic so that I might walk freely among Asgardians without being reviled for my appearance.”

Nebula nodded slowly, never taking her eyes from his face. “You - you're magnificent,” she breathed in awe. She'd never seen a Jotunn for herself, only pictures, and she thought that Loki looked very short to be a Frost Giant, but still - he was *glorious*.

“As are you, my lady,” Loki's mouth quirked in a smile. “Perhaps you understand, now, why you intrigue me so. You walk proudly in your skin, uncaring that any who see you will know you for what you are. I am the only member of my race free to walk among the wider galactic population, as are you - and yet I am *not* free.”

“You're wrong,” she said fiercely. “Do you know how it is to have everyone look at you and see only the scars? See only the last survivor of a dead race, one who has outlived her time and now is considered nothing more than a tool for those more powerful? You do not know how lucky you are, Your Highness. Your magic enables you to walk wherever you wish, without being stared at like a carnival freak!”

“And yet, here I am, constrained to Asgard,” he gestured.

Nebula laughed. “What would I not give, to have such as my home!”

“It could be,” he said quietly, and he reached for her hand, obviously intending to lift it to his lips.

Arrested, they stared at each other as patterns began to crawl over their hands; a lighter blue over Nebula's, a purple-violet over Loki's.

“I knew there was a reason I could not take my eyes off you,” Loki said, awed. “Aside from your beauty, that is.”

“Not beautiful,” she tried to deny again, and he shook his head.

“See yourself through my eyes, Lady Nebula. You are grace personified, the lethal grace of a snake waiting to strike. I cannot look away.” Finally, he completed the movement. Lifted her hand to his lips. She shivered a little at the chill he imparted, but it wasn't unbearable. It was - quite arousing, in fact. Her lips parted.

"*Loki*," she said his name at last, a thready gasp, and he sighed with pleasure, pulled lightly on her hand to draw her a little closer. Slipped a long arm around her waist and bent his head to take her lips with his own.

## **\*Chapter 32\*: Thanks, Steve! (Sam/Bucky/Darcy)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%20/FalconWinterShock\\_zpsw85nlpsz.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%20/FalconWinterShock_zpsw85nlpsz.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

"I might know a guy," Sam told Steve, glancing thoughtfully over at Barnes. "He's an engineer. You remember that ant-guy I was telling you about?"

"The one who kicked your ass?" Steve gave him a slight sideways grin.

"Yeah, yeah, that AI is an untrustworthy little bitch for blabbing on me. But I think he could help. I'll call him."

"You said he was based in San Francisco, though, didn't you? Would he come up here?"

"He might. He owes me one."

Steve glanced over at Bucky, who was slumping exhaustedly against the huge vice. "Call him. We need that arm checked out, make sure there's no trackers in it."

"There's definitely trackers in it," Bucky said wearily. "Why do you think I clamped the fucker in this thing? All this steel masks the signal. They won't be far away, though. They'll be looking for me."

"We need to move, then," Steve said, eyeing the arm. "I wonder if I could use the shield to block the trackers...?"

"Now you're thinking," Sam said, impressed. "If we put him in the back of the SUV, laid the shield over his arm..."

They grinned at each other. Steve headed out to get the car, since he had the keys in his pocket, and Sam looked at Bucky.

"When we let you out of there, you ain't gonna go crazy and try to kill me, are you?" he asked hopefully.

Bucky stiffened, his eyes rolling back, head jolting. He clenched his teeth for a moment before drawing in a long, hissing breath.

"No, I won't hurt you," he said quietly at last.

"What?" Sam startled, hand moving to clasp the opposite forearm.

"So it *is* you." Bucky smiled, a slight grimace. "I was programmed to kill anyone who spoke those words to me."

"Holy mother of God," Sam said under his breath, still staring incredulously. "And... you're not gonna do that?"

"Nope. Broke the programming. You, and the other one - you're safe from me."

Sam touched his stomach. "Is our third a potty mouth to you, too?"

That made Bucky laugh. "Yeah. Yeah, she's a mouthy one, huh? Looking forward to meeting her. Just as much as I was looking forward to meeting you."

The door at the end of the workshop rumbled open then, Steve silhouetted in the light. "Time to move, guys."

~~~~~

Of course, there was the slight problem that they had nowhere to go. Stark's resources, which they normally relied on so heavily, were denied them. Sam knew a fair few Air Force folks but didn't dare risk it, in case they felt that Bucky should be turned in to the authorities. It was Steve who came up with a solution, eventually.

"Lewis," he passed his phone across to Sam, who was sitting in the back by Bucky, keeping the shield carefully held over Bucky's arm. "Look up Darcy Lewis. She lives around here somewhere. We can hole up at her place for a bit. I know she's anti-Registration."

"And who exactly is Darcy Lewis?" Sam asked, finding the number and pressing Dial.

"She's Jane Foster's ex-intern. Good people. I talked with her a lot when I first woke up. She put a lot of things on that list of mine to help me catch up to living in this century."

The phone rang out. Steve frowned, disappointed. "Call Dr. Foster. She'll tell us where Darcy lives. We can try and get hold of Darcy again later."

Jane Foster was indeed happy to help, providing Darcy's address. She said she hadn't spoken to her friend in a few days but she was sure Darcy would help them. There was a definite subtext that Sam interpreted as meaning that they wouldn't be the first folks Lewis had helped evade the authorities. He really didn't want to know, so he just thanked Dr Foster and hung up.

Bucky was leaning against Sam's leg, his eyes closed, though Sam suspected he wasn't sleeping. Gently, he began to stroke Bucky's hair, humming softly to him as Steve drove them through the night.

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Scott Lang met them at Darcy's apartment building on the outskirts of Seattle. He took one look at Steve and his eyes widened.

"Captain America! Huge fan. Huge. I've been dying to meet you. I'm sorry about that whole break-in thing," he babbled, all in one breath, looking over at Sam. "We really needed that widget. Saving the world. You know how it is."

"Only too well," Sam said dryly. "I just hope it was worth it."

"Oh, definitely! Definitely. Killed the bad guy, rescued lots of people, got the girl. Kinda, anyway."

"I know how that is too," Sam said, barely keeping the grin from his face. Steve was outright laughing under his breath.

"Yes. Well." Scott looked across at Bucky. "And this is the infamous Winter Soldier. Mr Barnes."

"Just Bucky," Steve said when Bucky looked pained.

"You've got a problem, I understand..."

"Not here," Sam said. "Come on, let's get inside." He kept his arm firmly around Bucky, both of them holding the shield so that it was held up like a strange metal umbrella over his shoulder. Praying that would be enough to shield them from the satellites that the trackers in the arm would have to connect to.

They hadn't been able to get through to Darcy, and there was no answer when Steve knocked firmly on her apartment door. They all looked at each other in consternation. They really hadn't planned for this.

"Oh well," Scott said a little glumly, "time for me to resume my breaking and entering

career, I suppose.”

It was really quite startling to see him suddenly vanish from in front of their eyes, shrinking down so small they could hardly see him, before sprinting under the apartment door. A moment later they heard his voice.

“Hang on, there’s an alarm - I’ll just disable it...”

The door opened mere seconds after that, Scott gesturing them in with a smile.

“We’re really going to have to talk about what exactly you use those skills for normally,” Steve said as they walked past.

Scott gulped. “Or not...?”

His skills came in damned handy, though, Sam had to concede, when he had Bucky’s arm open in under a minute flat and was delicately disconnecting three tiny little devices not many seconds later, all with the shield held just over his head.

“Looks good,” Scott mumbled, “but I’m gonna go small and check the whole thing out, just to be sure?” he glanced up at Bucky, who nodded acquiescence.

Sam breathed a sigh of relief when Scott popped back out again and gave them the all-clear. Steve propped the shield against the wall as Scott carefully began to close the arm back up again.

“It’s done?” Sam asked quietly, and Scott nodded.

“Yeah, I disabled the trackers completely. And from the looks of them, they wouldn’t have been transmitting anyway, not long-range. Two of them were short-range only, and the third was GPS, but it was powered down. Battery run out, I think.”

“So they can’t track us here,” Steve said, with a soft sigh of relief.

“Nope; your friend’s place should hopefully still be here when she gets back.” Scott sat back on his heels and smiled at Bucky. “You’re all good, buddy.”

“Thank you,” Bucky said. He looked so tired and weak, Sam just wanted to snuggle him up in a blanket and feed him soup.

*Which was a thought...*

“I might see if there’s some food in the kitchen we could scrounge,” he suggested. “Otherwise, Scott could maybe go out for takeout? You’re the least recognisable of us...”

“Well, it helps to keep the mask on,” Scott grinned, “when one is superheroing.”

“Or, you know, being the size of an ant,” Sam cracked back, heading into the kitchen - well, kitchenette, really. He hoped the size of the room wasn’t an indicator of the quality of the foodstuffs he might find therein. Opening the fridge, he cocked his head.

“Huh.” There was fresh food there, milk, lettuce, tomatoes... “I don’t think your friend Lewis is out of town, Steve.”

“Why not?” Steve came to look in the fridge. “Oh - you might be right. Well - hopefully she won’t be too mad when she gets home.”

The sound of a key in the lock made them both startle and look towards the door.

“Uh-oh,” Scott said cheerfully. Sam shot him a glare. Really, Ant-Man could be quite inappropriate sometimes...

The door swung open to reveal a small brunette wearing a thick coat and scarf, woolly hat and glasses. Huge blue eyes widened behind the glass as she saw Scott, suited and slightly alien-looking, standing right in front of her, but she didn’t waste time screaming. She just whipped a Taser out of her pocket and fired.

Scott instinctively hit the buttons on his gloves and vanished down to ant-size, startling a

scream from Darcy - and the Taser's pins hit the man directly behind him right in the chest.

Sam went down with a strangled cry, thrashing on the floor, and Darcy yelled again as Steve leapt forward, stooping to yank the pins from Sam's chest.

"Oh my God, Steve, and he's the Falcon - oh, *no*," she dropped the Taser and bent over Sam anxiously.

"I'm so sorry, fuck, I didn't mean it!"

Sam's eyes were already wide as he choked and jerked; they couldn't go any wider. Darcy stared down at him, trying to steady his head - until a solidly muscled form crashed into her, shoving her up against the wall, a metal hand clamping on her throat.

"You hurt him!" Bucky growled fiercely.

Darcy made a shocked, strangled sound, and Steve grabbed Bucky, jerking him backwards.

"Let go of her, Buck!"

"Holy fuck, you?" Darcy choked out, staring at Bucky. "Really?"

He stared back at her, his own blue eyes going very wide. His hands clenched slowly, and then he just as slowly made them unclench.

"Really, doll," he said in a soft, slow drawl, looking her up and down appraisingly before he knelt beside Sam, who was still twitching on the floor. "And you just zapped our third into a twitching, drooling mess."

"Fuck my *life*," Darcy said succinctly, dropping to her knees beside Sam and making Steve shake his head.

"Darcy, you really do have a terrible potty mouth."

"Yeah, well, suck it up." Gingerly, she touched Sam's hand. "I really am so, so sorry."

"It's OK." He managed something vaguely like a smile, his fingers clenching on hers. Bucky took his other hand and squeezed it lightly.

"It's all gonna be okay, buddy."

"Feel like - I should - be sayin' that to you," Sam choked out. "You just met us both today, after all."

"Yeah. Been a pretty big day," Bucky understated, smiling, making Darcy stare at him in amazement for how handsome he was when he smiled. Blue eyes flickered up to hers and Bucky said "Wouldn't change today for anythin'."

"Think I could have done without the being Tasered part," Sam groaned, trying to push himself up. Bucky grasped his shoulders steadily as Darcy buried her face in her hands and groaned.

"I am never, ever going to live this down, am I?"

She felt Sam's hand touch her hair then; he tugged lightly on one of her hands, bringing it away from her face to make her look at him.

"You're already forgiven, beautiful," he said gently, "but no. You're right. It'll never be forgotten."

"Could be worse," Scott, almost forgotten by all of them in the background, said brightly. "She could have shot you with an actual gun. You know. With bullets."

They all turned to stare at him. He started backing slowly towards the door. "I should be getting back, actually. You know how it is. Stuff to do, people to save..."

The door slammed behind him.

Darcy looked back at Sam.

"I suppose he's right," she admitted. "Jane met Thor when she ran over him with her truck, after all."

Sam grinned. "I've heard that story. Thor tells it a lot."

"I haven't and I really think I'd like to," Bucky put in, grinning, "so why don't you come and sit with me on the couch, doll, and tell me all about you, while Sam and Stevie get to makin' some food for all of us?"

"Sounds good," Darcy admitted, and as Sam scrambled to his feet, aided by Steve and Bucky, she got up too and took off her hat and scarf, unbuttoned her coat. "It's been a long few days. Even worse since I lost my phone."

"Which is why we couldn't get hold of you," Steve realised, but Sam and Bucky were just staring, riveted, at the figure revealed as Darcy took her heavy coat off.

"Holy hot damn," Sam said reverently.

"Damn right," Bucky agreed with a broad grin, and the pair of them glanced at each other only momentarily before stepping forward to bracket Darcy, Bucky taking her discarded outerwear and laying them on the back of the couch.

"You are so gorgeous," Sam told Darcy, his hand coming up to smooth down her ruffled hair. She blushed pink, gazing up at him, then at Bucky.

"Coming from either of you two, that's just too incredible to be real," she murmured breathily.

"He's right, you're stunning," Bucky agreed with Sam. "Like one of the pinup girls all the guys used to swoon over back in the day."

Steve, in the kitchen, chuckled. "I thought Darcy reminded me of Rita Hayworth when I first met her," he put in.

"Nah," Bucky shook his head. "More Ava Gardner," one hand described a curvaceous silhouette in the air, making Steve let out a scandalised chuckle and Darcy laugh aloud.

"I think I can live with being put in that company."

"Siren of the silver screen," Sam was grinning, too, one hand stealing around Darcy's waist. "They're right, beautiful. You do have a pinup girl figure."

"And *you* have a very *heroic* figure," Darcy eyed the breadth of his shoulders appreciatively. "Thanks, Steve!" she called then.

"What for?"

"Breaking into my apartment to bring me two hot superhero soulmates!"

Steve grinned at her. "I would say any time, but... hopefully it'll just be the once!"

### **\*Chapter 33\*: A Million Times Better (Luke Cage/Karen Page)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/CagedPage\\_zpskrertlaw.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/CagedPage_zpskrertlaw.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

"So you're meeting this guy at Luke's bar?" Trish glanced over at Karen. "Well, at least we know you'll be all right if he turns out to be a creep."

"I told you, he's not a creep," Karen chuckled. She was only a couple of years younger than Trish and Jessica, but they were quite determined to both be Overprotective Older Sisters. And that wasn't even mentioning Claire who thoroughly mothered all of them, somehow while

drinking all of them except Jessica under the table at the same time.

Trish shook her head. "You've only met the guy a few times, Karen. Don't make snap judgements, especially not based on looks."

"Yes, mom," Karen cheeked her, making Trish laugh as she pulled the car over to let Karen out.

"Have a good night. And get Luke to walk you home or get you a cab later..."

"Yes, mom!"

Karen was still chuckling as she entered the bar and looked around. She didn't see Paul, her date. Who really *wasn't* a creep. He was a junior DA she'd met while Matt and Foggy were working a case. He'd been admiring but respectful, and hadn't asked her out until after the case was over. They'd only been out for coffee since, but the fact that he'd asked her out for dinner on Valentine's Day - she hugged herself happily. It was certainly promising. He was meeting her here - at her suggestion, because Trish was quite right, she could at least be quite certain of her safety at Luke's bar - and then they were going out to dinner at a cute little neighbourhood restaurant just a block away.

Luke nodded and smiled at her as she entered, but he was busy serving drinks, so Karen just nodded back. She'd never even spoken to him, she suddenly realised; Luke's wasn't really the kind of place for a girls' night out, they always went elsewhere, but he certainly knew who she was and he'd definitely look out for her. That was a nice, reassuring feeling. She found a seat and smiled at the other bartender as he came up to her.

"I'll just have a beer, thank you. I'm waiting for someone."

The beer was set in front of her a moment later, but not just a bottle as everyone else was getting; no, hers was poured carefully into a sparkling clean glass. Karen smiled and picked it up. Yes, Luke definitely knew who she was, and so did his staff.

She was happily people-watching, enjoying the beer - which she hadn't been asked to pay for, yet, and it was a premium European one from the taste - when it occurred to her that Paul was late. She checked her watch, fished her phone out of her bag. It was Sunday, so he wouldn't exactly have the excuse of working late at the office.

No missed calls or texts. She looked at her watch again. Fifteen minutes late. Well... yeah, that was pretty rude, especially on Valentine's Day.

*Hi Paul, you running late? I'm waiting at Luke's,* she texted.

It was a good five minute more before her phone pinged.

*Karen, I'm sorry. I only just realised today is Valentine's Day and I didn't mean to get your hopes up because I don't see us going anywhere, long-term. I've got political ambitions and I'll need a connected partner in life. You told me you've got a soulmark anyway so you knew we'd never get serious. Sorry again, Paul.*

"You absolute *bastard*," she said after a minute of stunned shock. Threw the phone down on the bar, where it slid in a puddle and shot off the other side. Only to be caught deftly by Luke's quick grab.

He couldn't help but see the screen. He'd spotted Karen's expression change from happy anticipation to disappointed rage from along the bar, come along to see what was the matter.

Turned out the guy she was supposed to be meeting was an even bigger prick than Jess had suspected. Jessica had checked him out as soon as Karen mentioned his name, called Luke and cautioned him to be on the lookout for her friend. And a good thing he was.

"He doesn't deserve you," Luke said intensely, putting the phone back down in front of

Karen, even though he was tempted to smash it and the offending message along with it. “You deserve a million times better than that moron.”

She stared at him from tear-sparkled blue eyes for a moment before choking out a laugh, her hand coming up to cover her mouth, but her lips curving up behind it in a grin of sheer delight.

“Looks like I do!”

“What?” Luke blinked, astonished. She’d just said his words, but she couldn’t possibly mean... she was unbuttoning the cuff of her blouse, pulling the sleeve up to her elbow, showing him the words written on the inside of her forearm.

“I always knew my soulmate would think I was special. Thank you so much for that, Luke.” She reached out and put her hand over his, snow-white against the blackness of his skin. He stared at it incredulously. Karen was gorgeous, ethereally beautiful and fragile, and he knew from Matt and Foggy how smart she was. Before this, he’d have said there was no way she could possibly be his soulmate, that he could never be a match for a woman like her.

And yet, she was laughing happy tears, looking at him as though he hung the moon. He reached out shyly and cupped her cheek in his free hand, touching a strand of her silky red hair gingerly. Karen laughed and turned her face to kiss at his palm.

“Never before has a girl been so delighted to be stood up on Valentine’s Day!”

### **\*Chapter 34\*: Magnificent (Dum Dum Dugan/Rose Roberts)**

Inspiration from this Tumblr post!

“Hello, Peg!” a familiar loud voice boomed, and Peggy whirled in surprise. “Sousa told me you might need a hand!”

“Dum Dum,” a broad smile came over her face. “I am *very* glad to see you.”

“Of course you are, I’m always here to yank your ass out of the fire, delightful ass that it is, Miss Union Jack,” he bussed her cheek cheerfully.

Peggy snorted. “I seem to remember it’s usually *your* arse getting singed. Or have you forgotten Milan?”

“Let’s not talk about Milan,” Dugan responded hastily, unshouldering his shotgun and snapping it closed. “So, what’s the situation, Peg?”

“I’ve cleared this area,” Peggy looked around at the few groaning men on the floor, paused to kick one of them firmly in the head on the way past, “but I lost contact with Rose and Jarvis back there a ways, so we’d better go find them.”

“Sure can do, ma’am!”

There were several downed men along the corridor Rose and Jarvis had to have taken. Peggy grinned to herself as she saw Dum Dum eyeing them.

“So I know Jarvis,” he said as they hurried along, “but who’s this Agent Rose fella?”

“Agent Roberts, Dugan. *She’s* a friend so I usually just call her Rose.”

They rounded a corner just then and stopped dead. Jarvis was standing behind a desk, clutching a fire extinguisher - unless Peggy missed her guess, he’d just used it to brain a downed man close by on the floor - and Rose was repeatedly smacking the head of another man against the edge of the desk, saying in irritated tones;

“Tell me the code to open that door, and I’ll stop.”

“Four...five...five...four!” the man screeched out between smacks to the forehead.

“There,” Rose said, “didn’t hurt a bit.”

“Yes it did!”

“Oh shut up.” She smacked his head even harder on the desk and let the unconscious man fall to the floor.

“She’s *magnificent*,” Dugan breathed, and Peggy swore for a moment that she could actually see stars in his eyes.

“Peg!” Rose said cheerfully, looking up and spotting her, “you caught up!”

At exactly the same moment, Jarvis said “Oh, Sergeant Dugan, how *marvellous*.” He discarded the fire extinguisher and came out from behind the desk.

Dugan completely ignored Jarvis and came forward towards Rose. At which point she grabbed the barrel of his shotgun, which he’d completely forgotten he was holding, twisted herself under it to sweep his feet from under him, whipped the shotgun from his hands and ended up standing astride his prone body, pointing the gun at his face.

“And just who might you be, handsome?”

“Rose, no, he’s a friend!” Peggy cried. Dugan, however, didn’t seem to mind in the slightest, staring up at Rose with an even more starry-eyed expression.

“You’re *magnificent*,” he told her fervently.

She tossed her red curls with a preening little gesture, and then suddenly froze. “I... am? You think so?”

“I thought so even before you said my soulmark words, darlin’,” he said. “Didn’t I say so, Peg?”

Peggy blew out her cheeks, shared a glance with Jarvis. “His first words were ‘She’s magnificent’, Rose,” she admitted.

“Well, then,” Rose smiled down at Dugan, stepped back and offered a hand to help him up. Peggy suppressed a snort as Dum Dum actually took it, a moment before leaping agilely to his feet with a huge grin and throwing his arms around Rose, bending her back over his arm for a dramatically passionate kiss.

“Well,” a visibly flustered Rose said when he finally let her up for air, “you coulda told me your name first, but since you kiss like *that*, I guess I don’t mind all that much.”

“Tim. Tim Dugan, my gorgeous Rose,” he framed her face in his big hands and kissed her again.

Jarvis sighed and politely looked away as one of Rose’s hands slid around to grope Dugan’s ass.

Peggy rolled her eyes. “Is there *any* chance you two could save it for later? Because we really should finish off this mission.”

Rose straightened her glasses and handed Dugan back his shotgun. “Yes. Yes, let’s get this taken care of. And then I’ll get *you* taken care of,” she gave Dugan a flirty sideways look. “Do you like pie?”

“Oh dear Lord, thank You for Your many, *many* blessings,” Dugan sighed ecstatically as Rose waltzed happily over to the door and tapped in the code.

**\*Chapter 35\*: One Night In Vegas (Remy LeBeau/Jane Foster)**

“Jane, we do not have the money,” Darcy stated flatly, turning to her tiny scientist, who was trying her best puppy-dog-eyes look. It was quite adorable, but Darcy literally couldn’t help her. “Read my lips. We. Do. Not. Have. The. Money. You’re already overspent on your lab budget.”

“Stark...”

“Has not forgiven you for calling Ultron Skynet. I really wouldn’t go there or we might not *have* a budget next year.”

“But I *need* it,” Jane said desperately. “Our computers just can’t run the calculations fast enough. Without JARVIS’s help, we’ll be *years* from a solution!”

“Jane, I’m sorry,” Darcy spread her hands helplessly. “But I can’t come up with *one* thousand dollars for new equipment. Never mind one *hundred* thousand.”

Jane stared at her for a long moment, her delicate jaw firming. “Right,” she said finally. “Fine. I’ll get it myself.” Spinning on her heel, she marched out of the lab.

“Where are you going?” Darcy yelled after her.

“Vegas!”

“What?” Darcy sprinted after Jane, caught up with her at the elevators. “Vegas? What the hell do you mean, you’re going to Vegas? We have no money, you can’t blow the money we haven’t got...”

Jane held up a finger. “I’ll hitch a ride with the Air Force. Rhodey owes me a favour. And I’ve still got about a hundred dollars in my personal checking account. That’ll be plenty.”

“For what?” Darcy said disbelievingly to the closing elevator doors. “Can I come?” she yelled uselessly at them before sighing and turning back to the lab. “Never mind, Darcy,” she consoled herself. “It’s not like you’d be in a suite at the Bellagio!”

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Jane wasn’t particularly fond of the Bellagio; the decor reminded her too much of Asgard. She picked the MGM Grand instead, lost herself in the crowds flowing through its vast gaming halls. Found the low-stakes blackjack tables and smiled.

Time to get started.

~~~~~

“Sir,” one of the employees in the casino control room appeared at Remy’s elbow, not quite hovering, “um... there might be an issue?”

Remy blinked, looked up at the young woman. “You’re not usually so indecisive, Viola,” he favoured her with one of his devastating smiles. She blushed a little.

“It’s - there’s a client. A woman. I haven’t been able to detect anything she’s doing, but... she’s winning a lot.”

“It *is* a casino. Some people get lucky,” Remy said.

Viola laughed. So did Remy.

“Of course, sir,” she said dryly. “This particular customer is having an exceptionally lucky night, in that case. I tracked her back to entry. She bought ninety dollars’ worth of chips, and in three hours, drifting from one blackjack table to another, she’s turned that ninety bucks into a little over fifteen thousand.”

That caught Remy's attention, and he turned his chair from where he'd been watching a high-stakes poker game on the big screen in front of his desk. "Card counting?"

"If she is, it's not by any method I've ever seen," Viola shook her head, "but... something about her's triggered my radar."

"Show me," Remy stood up.

The woman in question was a tiny, fragile-looking brunette wearing a scruffy lumberjack shirt, jeans and boots. She pushed long hair back from her face, considered her cards... doubled down and hit on seventeen.

The dealer turned over a four.

"*Merde*," Remy said softly as a hefty stack of chips went the brunette's way. "I see why you called me. Have you run her through facial recognition?"

"Yes, sir, and she's not in the casino database. Not the US database or the international one. I've put her into the *other* database..."

"Tut, tut, Viola, we're supposed to pretend we don't use the government's databases for casino business," Remy put his finger to his lips exaggeratedly.

"I was actually talking about the database leaked when SHIELD went belly-up, sir," Viola gave him a reproving look. "And I got a hit." She tapped keys at her keyboard and one of her screens flashed up a file.

"Doctor Jane Foster," Remy read, his eyebrows going up as he read. "Culver University graduate, astrophysicist - *three* doctorates - Nobel prize nominee..."

"My God, *that* Jane Foster," Viola suddenly twigged. "The one who used to date Thor!"

"*Très intéressant*," Remy murmured. Even as they watched, Jane gathered her chips into a rack, slid one to the dealer for a tip, and left the table. "I think I might go down to the floor. See what she's up to," he said thoughtfully after a moment. "Keep an eye on things up here for me, Viola."

"Sir," she nodded deferentially.

Remy slipped an earpiece in before heading down to the gaming rooms. Viola directed him to Jane Foster, who had apparently decided she'd had enough blackjack for now. She'd wandered into a high-stakes poker room open to the public and was watching a game.

Remy slipped quietly into the room, did his best to blend in with the spectators watching the game. It wasn't the easiest; he was over six foot tall and as good-looking as any male model, attracting plenty of glances. He stayed out of Foster's line of vision, though, watching her.

A seat opened up at the table and Jane slipped neatly into it, setting the big rack of chips in front of her. A murmur went around the room, the other players - all male - staring openly at her for a few moments. She ignored them all, looking only at the dealer. Who glanced at someone at the back of the room before nodding to her.

*Interesting*, Jane thought. *Casino security watching me, maybe?* She was quite certain they wouldn't be able to figure out exactly how she'd won so much at blackjack. It wasn't card counting so much as card *memorising*. She'd discovered a talent for it in college; long nights sitting by a telescope with her fellow students had left her plenty of time to learn to play all sorts of card games.

She'd never really had a chance to play in the big leagues, though. And she wasn't going to stop now. Not until she'd won her money. Blackjack was slow, though, and obviously she'd already made casino security suspicious.

Briefly, she considered cashing out and going to a different casino, but... the dealer was

already flipping cards skilfully across the table, and the five guys she was playing against all had *terrible* skills, she'd been watching them for twenty minutes.

*Just a few hands*, she decided. *Let's see how this goes*. Carefully, she edged up the corners of her two cards. Let them drop to the table again. Smiled and pushed a few chips towards the centre of the table.

She never showed her cards, Remy realised. Just folded gently, at a different point each round. Until, in the sixth hand, she didn't. She trebled her bet and stared down her opponents.

"What cards did she have?" Remy murmured into his microphone as Jane scooped the pot.

"She had nothing, sir! A four of clubs and ten of spades. Nothing on the table for her."

"So she knows how to bluff," Remy said quietly. He watched a few more hands, and then a place opened up at the table. "I'm going to sit in." He pulled the earpiece from his ear, dropped it in his pocket. Pulled out a handful of high-value chips he kept there. He wasn't technically allowed to 'win' money from the casino, but he did sometimes play as part of his job. The dealer didn't bat an eyelid as he slid into the empty seat, around the table from Jane.

Jane bit her lip thoughtfully as the tall, handsome man seated himself, nodding at the other players around the table. He held her eyes for a long moment before inclining his head gracefully.

*This one looks like a player. Maybe I should find another table...* but that last pot had taken her to eighty-five thousand. One more decent pot and she'd be done.

The cards were dealt. The man didn't even look at them before pushing a little pile of thousand-dollar chips to the pot.

Remy watched Jane carefully. She was more beautiful up close; he could see the pulse beating in her slender neck, the delicacy of her collarbones beneath the open collar of the scruffy checked shirt. *She doesn't eat enough*, he thought, a curious, protective feeling creeping over him. *Typical scientist. Too absorbed in her work to take care of herself*.

Her pulse increased fractionally as he watched. Lifting his eyes to hers, he found her staring at him, one eyebrow raised sardonically.

"My eyes are up here, buster," Jane snapped, uncharacteristically feeling flustered. It was pretty rare that guys stared at *her* boobs, after all.

Remy was about to chuckle when the words hit him and he startled back. The table dealer gave him a curious glance; he shook his head minutely at her before taking a deep breath and considering what to say. *If he should say anything*. Could he ever be anything but a liability to Doctor Jane Foster, Nobel Prize nominee, she who had dated a demigod?

Well, if nothing else, he could teach her to play better poker. The two of them were the only ones left in the hand, fifty thousand dollars in the middle of the table, and her pulse was absolutely hammering in her throat, she was terrified. She was running a bluff again. He flipped over his cards with a smile. *A full house*.

Jane smiled right back and flipped over her own cards. "Straight flush. I believe the pot is mine, sir. Nice playing with you."

Remy's jaw dropped. So did the dealer's. Jane scooped the pot, racked her chips, smiled at them. "And I believe I'm done for the evening. Thank you all for playing."

~~~~~

He caught up with her as she was cashing in her chips, declining a check and requesting

cash. He held up his casino security badge when she gave him a distrustful look.

"You again. Sore that you lost your money?" Jane smirked tightly at him. "I won it fair and square."

For a long moment he hesitated, wondering again if he really belonged in her life.

Then he realised that she was about to walk out of the casino with a bag full of cash and almost certainly get herself mugged.

"That's not what I wanted to talk to you about," he said quietly, unbuttoning his cuff and rolling up his sleeve.

Jane had been nervous when the hot guy from the poker table turned up and flashed a casino security badge. Not that she'd actually been cheating. And, wow, he was even more distractingly hot up close, tall and broad-shouldered, wearing a purple silk shirt under a fitted black waistcoat and tight black dress pants that did remarkable things for what she suspected was already a seriously good body.

And then he looked down at her with a half-smile and said her soulmate words, in the most delectably accented voice she'd ever heard.

"*What?*" Jane staggered back a half-step, even as he held out a bared, muscular forearm with a line of her scientist's scribble on it. *My eyes are up here, buster.*

"I've got this," Remy nodded to the wide-eyed cashier, took the bag of Jane's cash in one hand, and her elbow in the other, and led her to one of the discreetly-placed doors that led to the casino's back rooms. She went with him unresistingly, staring up at him in wide-eyed amazement. It wasn't until he closed a door behind them and pushed her gently to sit down in a chair that she found her voice.

"Who *are* you?"

"My name is Remy LeBeau, *ma chère*," he rumbled, in that *stupidly* sexy accent again. It was a good thing she was already sitting down, Jane decided, clutching at the arms of the chair, because her knees turned to water every time he spoke. "And I believe I am your soulmate, *non?*"

She nodded jerkily as he perched a hip on the desk in front of her, sitting down. The fabric of his pants stretched tight over his thighs and she couldn't stop staring. "Your words are on my back. Oh, I'm Jane, by the way, Jane Fos..."

"I know who you are." Reaching out tentatively, he very lightly touched her face, brushing a wayward strand of fine brown hair back behind her ear. "Genius astrophysicist who built a bridge between two worlds and once dated a god."

"Asgardian," Jane corrected automatically. "They're not gods. Just aliens." Looking up at him, she felt compelled to say "You work here?"

One broad shoulder lifted and fell in a graceful shrug - *he was incredibly graceful*, she thought, she'd never seen a man move like that, and the only *woman* she knew who moved like that was Natasha Romanoff - and said "Sometimes."

"What does that mean?" she asked, her curiosity piqued.

"I stand in for the casino boss here when he wants a holiday, or a night off. Other casinos too, sometimes." Again that graceful half-shrug. "Sometimes I just play poker."

"Ah," she glanced at the bag full of cash he'd set on the desk. "About that..."

"It's yours, Jane," he said softly, and she almost swooned at the way he said her name, the hard *J* softening to a *zh* sound. "But I thought - I hoped - that you might care to stay a little longer. With me. I could comp you a suite for the night. Not that you have to gamble any more."

You're free to leave at any time, with your money, though I'd prefer to escort you. Just to make sure that you arrive at your destination unmolested."

She licked her lips as he leant towards her, his eyes, an unusual red-amber colour, fixed on hers.

"Perhaps I want to be molested, a little bit," she whispered.

"That, too, could be arranged," Remy smiled lazily, a big cat toying with his prey.

Jane shivered with anticipation as he picked up her bag and held out a big hand. Putting hers into it, she smiled up at him, feeling the warmth and strength of his fingers as they curled around hers. He startled her then by lifting her hand to his mouth, his lips pressing lightly against the back of her fingers, eyes holding hers as he did so.

"Ahh," Remy said softly as he saw Jane's pupils widen and dilate. "Perhaps your poker face is only good when you are playing poker, *petite*."

She had to laugh at that. "Better than yours. You were so sure you had me."

"*C'est vrai!*" He kissed her hand again, chuckling with her. "You beat me fair and square, *petite*. This time."

"That sounds like a challenge," Jane said with a smirk.

"Indeed. Perhaps, next time, we play in private - for something other than money, *oui?*"

That sounded like an appallingly bad idea. She really wouldn't be able to keep track of cards in her head if he started taking clothes off that deliciously hot body.

But then again, this might be one poker game she'd be happy to lose...

"Sounds like fun," Jane said with a smile, letting him lead her to the door.

Merde - shit

Très intéressant – very interesting

ma chère – my dear

petite – little one

C'est vrai – that's true

***Chapter 36*: Best Day Ever (Bucky/Wade/Darcy)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%20/WinterShockPool_zpswgukt5gt.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“You have a target.”

The Asset blinked as his handler spoke. Looked down at the tablet pressed into his hand, before skating his fingers lightly over the surface, expertly manipulating the device.

“No images of his face?” he asked, speaking Russian, as his handler had done.

“You won’t need them. He doesn’t take the mask off. We understand he’s seriously disfigured.”

Broad shoulders moved in an uncaring shrug as the Asset returned to studying the file he’d been given.

“He heals,” he said at last.

“Yes, and he’s fast. Maybe faster than you. That’s why we’re sending in a whole team, not just you.” The handler hesitated before adding “The healing factor is why we want him, of course. If we can replicate that, it will make a difference to all humankind.”

The Asset’s blue eyes studied him steadily, unblinking, and for the hundredth time the handler wished that Alexander Pierce hadn’t died in the Triskelion. Pierce had been able to say that kind of bullshit and make the Asset *believe* him.

Fortunately, the Asset was too well conditioned to question the orders. “When?” was all he asked.

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“Oh, you’re not serious, the middle of the fucking night?”

*A traditional hour for sneak tactical assaults, Wade.*

“But I’d just got to sleep!”

*Do you want to whine at me or do you want to deal with the guy sneaking up on you from behind?*

“I got him, I got him!” Wade was half-in, half-out of his tactical suit; he grabbed a pistol from the nightstand and shot the mook who was trying to chuck a net over him.

“A *net*, are you shitting me? Ouch!” reaching behind him, he plucked the dart out of his ass. “Oh. That was a distraction.”

*And you fell for it.*

“Bitch.” His eyes rolled up in his head and he keeled over.

“Who are you callin’ a bitch?” The Asset stepped into the room and surveyed the unconscious, half-naked man curiously. Carrying him back to the extraction vehicle with half the suit flapping around him seemed inefficient, so he pulled it up to the man’s waist and over his arms. The two long, slightly curved blades in the harness interested him, so he left them in place for now. Rolling the merc over, he was about to pick him up when a row of words across the man’s bared stomach arrested his attention.

“That is what I said to you.” He’d been told that the mercenary known as Deadpool was horribly scarred, but it wasn’t so bad. Not as ugly as the scarring where the Asset’s prosthetic arm met his body, anyway. Shrugging as the thought drifted away again - not part of the mission - the Asset picked Deadpool up, slung him easily over his shoulder and left without a backwards

glance.

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The dart had contained enough ketamine to knock out an elephant for a few hours, but Deadpool, to the Asset's surprise, woke up in the back of the transport van. He looked around blearily for a couple of seconds, focussed on the Asset and shot upright, lunging towards him, brought up short by the bars separating the sections of the van. His second action was to grab back over his shoulders for the hilts of his katanas, then at his waist for guns, various pockets on his belt. Several other secret compartments in his suit.

"What the shit, nobody ever finds the razor wire in my ankle cuff!"

The Asset stared at him silently for a long moment before reaching up and pulling off his mask.

"Oooh, hello, fuck me, hot stuff. Soon, please," Wade eyed the gorgeous blue-eyed brunette lustfully. The other man blinked silently back at him before slowly starting to unfasten his jacket and shrug it off.

"What, *now*? Really?" Wade blinked. "I mean, you're seriously hot and all, but in the back of a moving van? No mattress in here, either..." he looked around. Looked back at Hot Murder Machine to find the other man had stripped to the waist and was showing off a very nicely muscled torso, a very scary-looking cybernetic arm, and several words in spiky black script across a chiselled six-pack...

"Fuck me!"

"You already said that." Hot Murder Machine gave him a slow, devastating smile. "But we've got some problems to deal with first." He held up Wade's katanas, offered the hilts through the bars. "I believe these are yours?"

"And so are you apparently, wow, I never thought I'd get a murder machine for a soulmate though I suppose it wasn't exactly statistically *unlikely*, but hot damn if you ain't the *sexiest* murder machine I've ever seen."

"Do you always talk this much?"

"Yes. You'll get used to me. What's your name?"

Wade's soulmate was using one of the tools he'd obviously confiscated from Wade's belt pouches to pick the lock on the cage door. He paused at that, looked at Wade for a long moment from those amazingly blue eyes, and said almost questioningly "Bucky?"

"You sound really unsure about that."

"Maybe I am." Bucky ducked his head, hair falling over his eyes, and looked back at the lock again.

"In-ter-est-ing. Well, I'm Wade. Wade Wilson. Which you probably already knew since you shot me in the ass with a tranquilliser gun, which, *ouch*, by the way. I haven't forgiven you for that yet."

The lock clicked and the cage door swung open. Bucky held out a bag. Looking in, Wade grinned to see all his weapons. Even the razor wire.

"Okay, *now* I've forgiven you. What's the plan?"

"When the van stops," Bucky glanced across at him, hastily reloading his belt pouches and checking his guns, "kill everyone."

"I *like* you. We're gonna get along just *fine*."

"Only if I figure out a way to shut you up once in awhile."

“Oh, sugar,” Wade flashed him a wicked grin, “I’m sure you can figure out *something* to put in my mouth to keep me quiet.”

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“Hi!” Wade walked right up to the reception desk just inside the doors of Avengers Tower and smiled at the receptionist. Not that she could see it behind his mask, of course. He watched her slide a stealthy hand under the surface of her desk, almost certainly to push a panic button. “I hope that button brings Captain America down here! Because I brought his stray back.” He jerked a gloved thumb over his shoulder at Bucky, who was trying to hide inside his hoodie and looking nervous. “Only, the Avengers can’t keep him. Well, they can, but only if they agree to keep me too. Because we’re soulmates, y’see. I’m sure Tony Stark could afford an extra one for board and lodging, yeah? I don’t eat much.”

“Yes you do,” Bucky muttered.

“True, but I’m willing to bet I eat less than Thor. And I don’t have expensive tastes.”

“Only because you can’t afford them.”

“You see what I have to put up with?” Wade said conversationally to the very wide-eyed receptionist. “Honestly, if he wasn’t so good at making me scream his name in the throes of passion, I’d take offense.”

The receptionist turned absolutely scarlet. And a low, feminine voice behind Wade said;

“Wade goddamn Wilson. I should have known it was you when I got a message that there was an idiot in a red suit making trouble in the lobby.”

“Well of course it’s me, Spidey would have swung right into the penthouse and Daredevil won’t set foot in Manhattan,” Wade scoffed. “How are you, my lovely?” He turned and smiled at Natasha. Then frowned as he realised she was part of a circle of superheroes all pointing weapons at Bucky.

“Now come on, be nice. He’s not here to make trouble. He wouldn’t hurt a fly.”

“Tell it to my bullet scars,” Natasha said dryly.

“You still look *faaabulous* in a bikini, darling, and you know it.”

Natasha’s mouth twitched. Clint and Tony laughed outright, and Tony opened his faceplate to grin at Wade. “I keep trying to convince her to model for me so I can check.”

“Why don’t you just fly everyone to your private island in the Caribbean for the weekend? I volunteer to be the cabana boy.”

“Hey,” Bucky scowled at him. “You don’t get to be a slut for anyone but me, anymore. And our third, when we find her.”

Steve’s eyes were virtually out on stalks, he looked so shocked. “*This* - is *your* soulmate, Buck?” he managed in a strangled gasp at last. “*Deadpool?*”

“Glad you got it right and didn’t call me Skullpoopl. You’re gonna hate me, though, I swear too much and kill bad guys instead of giving them a chance to redeem themselves,” Wade said cheerfully.

“He gives really good head, though,” Bucky said, equally cheerfully, realising that this was in fact quite a fun game of Steve-baiting.

“You can both stay,” Tony said decisively, “because even I have never yet managed to make Rogers turn that particular shade of puce. Welcome to the Tower.”

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“Ooh, this is nice,” Wade said admiringly, skipping around the common floor areas. Checking out the bar. Bucky followed behind him, still darting occasional wary glances at Steve, who hadn’t quite recovered from the succession of shocks he’d received in the lobby.

“And oooh, *hello, that* is even nicer,” Wade paused in the doorway of the kitchen as he found the most delectable ass bent over in front of him.

Darcy stood up from the stove, freshly baked pan of brownies in her oven-gloved hands, and turned to give him raised eyebrow.

“You said my soulmate words.”

Wade clapped his hands and jumped up and down, squeaking with delight. “You said *my* soulmate words!”

Darcy squealed, her whole face lighting up, and dropped the pan of brownies.

Which Bucky caught, clanking in his metal hand, before they hit the floor. “Careful with those, doll,” he straightened up, setting the pan down on top of the stove.

“You too? Oh *my*,” Darcy looked from one to the other of them, from one damaged, scarred man to the other, and in her expression there was nothing but pure, unadulterated delight. She opened her arms, and they both went to her instinctively, burying their faces in her soft dark hair, breathing in her warm, comforting scent.

“Best day *ever*,” Darcy murmured as she was sandwiched between two solidly muscular bodies, strong arms wrapping around her to hold her close.

Wade smiled against her hair. “Of course it is. It’s Taco Tuesday!”

## **\*Chapter 37\*: Missing Memories (Steve/Logan)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Captain%20Wolverine\\_zps0bshcyed.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Captain%20Wolverine_zps0bshcyed.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

The first thing Steve had done once he woke up in the future - once he finally managed to get some privacy, or what he was reasonably sure was privacy - was look at his soulmark.

It was gone, the patch of skin on the back of his left calf where James’ scribbled writing had once been completely blank. Of course. He tried to calculate how old James would be if he was still alive, but he’d never actually known his soulmate’s date of birth. They’d had so little time together, a few snatched hours before James had to leave for Japan. One single, incandescent night in each others’ arms. The night before Bucky fell from the train, Steve remembered, that awful sense of loss coming over him again, but this time for the loss of his soulmate as well as his best friend.

“What happened to you, James?” he whispered into the darkness. “How long did you outlive me?” He already knew that he wouldn’t ask Nick Fury. The SHIELD director was the kind of man who would tell him to keep his mouth shut, he suspected; wouldn’t want the Captain America legend tainted by the inconvenient fact that the man himself was gay.

The strangest thing, though, was that even with the mark gone, with James dead, Steve felt like he could still feel his soulmate. That the tenuous, nascent bond they’d formed during that one incredible night together was, somehow, still extant, even though James felt... *different*, somehow. The one emotion Steve could define that he could sense through the bond - the bond that had to be a figment of his imagination - was *rage*.

It wasn't until some weeks later - after the Battle of New York, actually - that Steve realised he had a new soulmark. This one, on his right buttock. Fortunately, with the new phone Stark had given him, he didn't have to resort to contortions and a mirror to read what it said.

*What the hell have you been doing?*

It was then that he realised. *Soulmates*. James's soul, reborn in a new body. An irrational surge of resentment ran through Steve, and he deleted the image from the phone, gritting his teeth. Whoever his soulmate was now, whatever body, he couldn't be what James had been. They hadn't spent long nights hunkered down in trenches as shells whistled and exploded overhead, hadn't carried wounded comrades from the field of battle in their arms, hadn't thrown themselves into harm's way without thought to protect a friend.

Steve closed his eyes and lay back on the bed. Remembering his soulmate's fierceness, his strength, his indomitable will. Meeting him with the Howling Commandos had been one of the more surreal moments of Steve's life.

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"Look who I found trying to drink the bar dry, gentlemen," Peggy said, walking into the room with a broad smile on her face.

Two big men followed her, broad grins on stubbled faces. They were wearing Canadian Army uniforms, and Steve remembered how handsome he'd thought both of them were, both of them taller even than he, one a giant of a man, about six foot six, the other only a couple of inches shorter.

"Victor!" Bucky screeched, rocketed up from his chair and across the bar, arms outstretched. Steve gaped in astonishment as Bucky threw himself into the bigger man's arms.

"What the hell?" he said in astonishment.

"Didn't Barnes tell you that he'd found his soulmate?" Falsworth, sitting beside him, asked.

"He mentioned it, but we hadn't really had time to talk - I just didn't expect - *that*," Steve stared at the two men, now kissing, oblivious to the shouts and catcalls of the amused Howlies.

"Ain't my brother good enough for you, then?" a deep voice sneered, and Steve's eyes snapped wide with shock. He stared at the other man, taking in the unruly dark hair, the thick stubble, the sneer on that handsome face. Slowly, Steve stood to face the other man, gaze into his golden-coloured eyes. He offered a small smile as the Howlies fell silent, sensing something momentous.

"Ten bucks on Rogers," Morita whispered.

"*Vingt francs sur Howlett*," Dernier chuckled back quietly.

Steve barely heard them. There was a ringing in his ears as his vision narrowed on that single face, the face of the man who was the other half of his soul.

"If he's *your* brother, he's surely good enough for anyone," he said, and wasn't surprised that his voice came out a couple of octaves higher than usual.

His soulmate stared at him for a long moment before cracking that broad, white-toothed grin again. "Well, ain't I the lucky one. Victor!" He reached out without even looking, punched his brother in the shoulder. "My soulmate's prettier than yours."

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Logan sighed, turned the glass in his hands slowly. He was getting maudlin tonight. His

long-term memory had only recently started to return, aided by the Professor and Jean's gentle touch on his brain. And the first goddamn thing he'd remembered was the soulmate he'd lost.

He'd still been trying to shore up Victor at the time, maddened with grief over losing Bucky. The agonizing burning pain on his biceps as his soulmark slowly erased itself had been the worst pain he'd ever known.

To this day, the blank skin on his arm remained a reminder, a reproach. He should have stayed with Steve; he was still sure he'd made the wrong choice, but he and Victor had been trying to follow a straighter path then, had gone where the Army sent them.

"That one," Logan said, pointing a steady finger at a bottle high on the bar. The bartender looked at the beer bottles and bourbon glasses in front of Logan, looked at the steady finger and sober eyes, and shrugged.

"It's your liver." He poured out a shot glass, and Logan lifted it, took it in his hand for a moment, gave it a swirl. Watched the thin, bright green liquid swirling inside. Let his mind slide back seventy years, to the blue eyes of his soulmate gazing at him, bright with laughter and lust.

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"I can't get drunk," Steve said, laughing, as James made him sit at the bar.

"Let you into a secret, boy," Victor leaned over and grinned, showing his sharp teeth. "Neither can we, normally. But this stuff's pretty good."

Steve looked doubtfully at the green spirit in the bottle set before him. "Absinthe? Doesn't that cause hallucinations?"

"Dunno what it does to ordinary folks," James said with a shrug, "but we've found if we chug a whole bottle down quick, it's like bein' drunk again. If only for a little while."

"Have you ever even *been* drunk, Stevie?" Bucky leaned past Victor to give him a curious look.

Steve flushed and picked up the bottle. James grinned, slid a muscled arm around his waist.

"Here's hopin' you can. So maybe you'll relax and I can take a few liberties," he murmured, hot tongue playing with Steve's ear as the blond shivered.

Steve upended the bottle, throat working as swallow after swallow of the green spirit trickled down his throat. He set the bottle back down on the bar less than a minute later, turned to James - and almost fell off the bar stool.

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Logan laughed at the memory. It hadn't lasted all that long, but while it had, Steve had been an endearingly clumsy and delightfully handsy 220 pounds of pure temptation. Lifting the glass, he closed his eyes for a moment.

"Miss you, Stevie," he whispered to the blond, blue-eyed ghost who haunted his dreams. "Always will." He downed the glass, savoured the single second of buzz that came with it - and shot to his feet, cursing luridly.

"What the hell, man!" the barman cried, scrambling back, but Logan paid no attention to the terrified man, just dragging his jacket off and yanking up the sleeve of his shirt, staring in horror at the words burning themselves into the skin of his wrist.

*I'm sorry*

Logan's eyes stung and burned; turning away he stormed outside into the night, uncaring

that it was bitterly cold. Staring up into the sky he cursed in half a dozen languages.

After all these years, Steve's soul had finally been reborn. Into some mewling infant who could have no idea of the greatness of the legacy he stood to inherit. Into someone who, no matter how he looked or spoke, could never be another Captain America.

Logan's eyes stung as he finally started trudging towards his snow-covered truck. He wasn't going to go looking. Give it another forty years. Time for the kid to grow up some, live some life. Grow into that great soul he'd inherited.

Logan had waited this long, after all. What was another few decades?

Thinking about that, he turned around and trudged back to the bar. Might as well get the rest of that absinthe. And whatever else the barman would sell him. It was gonna be a long few years.

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Nine months later

"If you've *quite* finished wallowing in self-pity," the voice took Logan by surprise. He whirled to see Ororo standing watching him, her arms folded.

"You don't know nuthin' about it," he growled.

"I know you've buried yourself up here in this miserable hellhole for better than half a year, when the fact is that we need you." She looked around at the rough shack Logan had been occupying. In the far northern Canadian wilderness, it suited his wish for isolation just fine.

"You don't need me."

"We do, Logan," she unfolded her arms and reached out her hands towards him, her expression imploring. "The world's changed since you've been hiding out, and not for the better. Please. Come back with me. Rogue and the others, they miss you."

Logan sighed at the thought of his adopted daughter. She'd be worrying about him as usual. Glancing around the crude cabin, he shrugged. "What the hell. Ain't doin' much right now anyway."

"Because the snow is twenty feet deep and it's twenty below zero?" Ororo said tartly.

"What do you care, weather witch?"

"I don't, but the jet will ice up if we stay too long, so unless you want to listen to Scott grouse about that for hours..."

"I'm comin'," Logan hastily grabbed the small satchel he kept his few personal belongings in.

Even Scott almost cracked a smile when Logan climbed into the X-jet after Ororo. And that was the least friendly greeting he got; Rogue practically flung herself on him and burst into tears when he arrived back at the mansion, and Kitty and Jubilee piled on him as well, kissing his grizzled cheeks before complaining that he stank.

"Then y'all should have waited until I'd had a chance to have a hot shower," Logan grumped, but secretly he was delighted to see them, and they knew it.

"Danger Room session, nine o'clock tomorrow," Scott called after him as Logan headed for his room, surrounded by a gaggle of chattering teenage girls. "Don't be late!" His only answer was a raised middle finger, of course. Scott had expected nothing less.

"What the *fuck* are those things?" Logan gaped in astonishment at the *monsters* the Danger Room simulator was pitting the kids against. "Seriously, Scott, have you lost your mind?"

“Seriously, Logan, have you been living in a hole? Oh yes, that’s right, *you have*. They’re Chitauri, Logan, they’re real and they fucking *invaded Earth* a few months ago.”

“*What?*” Logan turned on Scott in absolute horror. His claws had sprung instinctively from his hands at the first sight of the aliens. “Where? Where are they?”

“Gone. The Avengers stopped them.”

“Who?”

Scott looked frustrated enough to spit. Jean touched Logan’s arm lightly. “I think there’s a lot you need to catch up on. Come on. Ororo and I will fill you in.”

None of them, not even the Professor, had ever known who Logan’s soulmate was, just that he died during the war. So they couldn’t possibly have been prepared for his reaction when they showed him the TV footage from the Battle of Manhattan.

Logan stood, staring incredulously at the images of aliens pouring through a hole in the sky above Manhattan - but it wasn’t the monsters that held his attention. It was the tiny figure in a red, white and blue suit wielding a starred shield as though it was an extension of his arm.

“This isn’t possible,” Logan said, stunned.

“I’m afraid the Chitauri are all too real,” Jean told him. “We arrived too late for the battle, and SHIELD were heavily involved in the clean-up, so we stayed well clear, of course.”

Logan nodded. The X-Men and SHIELD had a wary truce at the best of times. Especially since Logan - and others - were very sure they’d seen SHIELD patches on guards and scientists at Weapon X facilities. Higher-ups had flatly denied it, but Logan knew what he’d seen. “That’s not what I’m talking about,” he said gruffly. “I find I’m quite able to believe in hostile aliens pouring through a hole in the sky, oddly enough. What I can’t believe is that SHIELD had the gall to put some impostor in a Captain America suit and parade him about like that!”

Both Jean and Ororo looked at him oddly, for the pure affronted rage in his tone. “But - it’s not an impostor,” Jean said, puzzled.

“Steve Rogers died in 1945,” Logan snapped back at her.

“Actually, he didn’t,” Ororo corrected him. “His plane crashed somewhere in the Arctic in 1945.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I spent thirty fucking years helping Howard Stark look for it!”

“Well, SHIELD did find it. Just a few weeks before the battle. They thawed Captain America out and he’s... well, he’s still Captain America.” Ororo gestured to the tiny blue figure flinging a shield up into a flying alien, bringing it to ground.

Numb with shock, Logan put his hand over the words on his wrist. “When?” he asked, “when did that happen?” His voice sounded tinny and far-away to his own ears.

He barely waited for Jean’s answer before he was running out of the room. “Tell Scott I need his bike again!” he yelled back over his shoulder as he headed for the garage in a dead sprint.

~~~~~

Logan arrived in Washington D.C. just in time to see three gigantic flying aircraft carriers shooting each other down over the Potomac. Cursing, he gunned the bike through the streets at reckless speeds. Steve would be in that mess, he knew it in his adamantium-enhanced bones. In it up to his idiotically reckless neck.

A black-clad figure was dragging a blue-clad figure out of the river as Logan arrived, ditching the bike and scrambling down the riverbank, racing towards the pair. A pale face looked

up at him before the black-clad figure turned away.

“Barnes?” Logan said disbelievingly, but the other man was already gone, and frankly Logan had more things to worry about just then, because Steve looked barely alive. Kneeling beside his soulmate, he turned him to his side in the recovery position. Looked up at the roar of chopper blades, his fists clenching, claws ready to emerge. If those bastards were here to try and finish Steve off...

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“On your left,” Steve said with a weak grin when he opened his eyes to see Sam sitting beside his hospital bed, reading a book. Sam gave him a smile in return, but his face quickly stilled.

“On *your* left, buddy,” he said quietly, before getting up and leaving the room.

Befuddled - and feeling physically weak for the first time since 1942 - Steve turned his head. To stare disbelievingly into the golden eyes of his soulmate.

“What the hell have you been doing?” Logan said gruffly, to cover the emotion he felt. And then, as tears welled in Steve’s blue eyes; “Oh shit, no, don’t cry.”

“I’m sorry,” Steve choked into his shoulder as Logan hugged him, gently, to avoid putting pressure on his wounded, weakened body.

“It’s alright. It’s okay, Stevie...”

“I thought you were dead!”

“I was remade - and I think you were too. Do me a favour and don’t crash-land any more planes in the Arctic, huh?” Logan pulled back and gave him a crooked grin.

“I’ll try.” Steve’s smile faded, then. “James...”

“I go by Logan these days, actually.”

“Logan? Okay, then. But how are you still alive? And - is Victor?”

“Long story I wish I’d told you last time we were together. I’m X-gene. So’s he. And I haven’t heard from him in a couple years, but yeah. As far as I know.”

“Because Bucky’s still alive too. The Russians - Natasha thinks Hydra kept him cryogenically frozen.”

“Shit,” Logan stared at him. “Shit, it really *was* Barnes I saw on the riverbank!”

“He didn’t know me.”

“Fuuuck,” Logan put his head in his hands. “I didn’t believe Victor! He kept saying that his soulmark faded in, and then out again...” *Had he contributed to his brother’s madness?* he wondered. *I have to find him...*

“I have to find him,” Steve said, struggling to sit up, and Logan realised that Victor would have to wait. First they had to find Barnes, get him out of Hydra’s control.

Gently, he put a hand on Steve’s shoulder, pressing him to lie down again. “We’ll find him. Together. When you’re strong again.”

Steve let himself be pushed down, feeling how difficult it was to push back against even the small amount of pressure Logan was exerting. Smiling up at him, still unable to believe that somehow, against all the odds, his soulmate was really here.

“So tell me. What have you been doing for the last seventy years while I was a Capsicle?”

***Chapter 38*: Excellent Taste In Dogs (Frank Castle/Darcy Lew...**

“We’ll have to put him down, Miss Lewis,” her supervisor said. “You know the rules.”
“He’s not a fighting dog,” Darcy denied robustly, “can’t possibly be, he’s a complete softy!”

She got a raised eyebrow while the woman looked down at the pit bull cross happily eating treats from Darcy’s hand. “Considering his behaviour, I’m inclined to agree with you, but a dog doesn’t get scars like that from one attack. Those are fighting scars, and lots of them.”

Darcy set her jaw stubbornly. “What if he just never went on the books?”

She could tell her supervisor was thinking about it. “I suppose... the police officer who brought him in never did file any actual paperwork. Just said he was picked up at a crime scene...”

“He was never here,” Darcy grabbed a spare collar and leash from the crate by the shelter’s back door, hastily put them on the dog. “You never saw him.”

“Dog? What dog?” her supervisor said, determinedly looking at the ceiling as Darcy let herself out.

She grinned all the way back to the Tower. Volunteering her Sunday afternoons at the animal shelter was a way for her to escape the high-octane environment of the Avengers and all the madness that went on around them. She’d never expected to get a pet out of it.

Talking of which, was she even allowed to have a pet in the Tower? Glancing down at the dog, she firmed her jaw. She’d convince Tony. Somehow. Although Pepper would probably be an better sell...

“What am I going to call you, boy?” She patted the wedge-shaped head and the dog looked up at her and happily lolled his tongue out. “I better come up with a name for you before we get to the Tower or those idiot men will be trying to call you Bruiser or Tank or something, and you’re too much of a sweetheart for that.”

She got her fingers thoroughly licked for the praise, which made her laugh. “Softy. That one? No, not that... Ducky?”

The dog just looked at her. “No. You’re right. Sounds too much like Bucky.” She ran through several more names, but none of them felt quite right, somehow. Nor did the dog respond. She was on the block leading up to the Tower when she tried “Bunny?” and he stopped dead in his tracks and looked up at her with a soft *woof*.

“Bunny? Seriously?”

The dog sat down and panted happily, tongue hanging out.

“Well, Bunny it is then, you complete goofball.” She laughed at him, scratching his torn ears. “Bunny. What a ridiculous name for a fighting dog.”

Bunny woofed at her again, making Darcy shake his head. “You are an idiot. Everyone in the Tower is gonna adore you. And boy, are you *ever* gonna love Steve. He throws sticks further than anyone. Actually, he and Thor will probably have a stick-throwing contest for you. And then Tony will make you a self-throwing stick that’s probably powered by a miniature arc reactor...”

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"You need a goddamn hobby, Frank."

"Yeah?" Frank spat blood, grinned at Red. "I got one."

"One that's less messy." Matt tested sore ribs, sighed. "I sound like a hypocrite, huh."

"You're Catholic, it goes with the territory. That and the guilt." Frank looked around at the unconscious - but not dead - bodies strewn around them. "You wanna wait around until the cops get here?"

"No," Matt shook his head, grimaced as the movement hurt. "Let's get out of here."

Frank scooped up the gun Matt had kicked out of his hand, stuck it in one of his holsters. "We gotta stop meeting like this, Red," he joked as the two of them crossed to the next rooftop over. "People are gonna start to talk."

Matt snorted. "Like I said. Get a hobby. Get a freaking pet."

"I had one. The fucking Irish took him back, remember? And then he'd disappeared by the time I got to go looking. Vanished without a trace."

Matt nodded, remembering the friendly pit bull cross. "Yeah, I remember. I was kinda surprised; didn't pick you for the type to be a complete soft touch for a fighting dog that didn't like to fight."

"He was a conscript, not a volunteer. No shame in not having the stomach for fighting. We're not all made for war like you and I." Frank was quiet for a moment as they let themselves down onto a fire escape. "I miss him," he admitted quietly as they worked their way downwards. "He was a good dog. Didn't deserve the shit hand life dealt him."

Matt said nothing. There wasn't really anything he could say.

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"This is a bad time to be late," Darcy muttered to herself. Bunny tugged at his leash and she tugged back. "Don't you dare try and run off, now. The only reason I'm not panicking and sprinting for the subway is that you're with me."

She'd never been to Hell's Kitchen before, and while it wasn't nearly as scary as the name implied, she had a feeling that it would be a lot nicer in daylight.

"Of course the only blasted shop in New York that stocks this crazy rare vodka Nat adores would be in a really dodgy part of town," she clutched Bunny's leash a little tighter as she muttered to herself, pulling the dog back closer to her side. "I wonder if you'd be any use if someone actually attacked me or if you'd just try and lick them to death like you do everybody else?"

Bunny licked her hand - and then let out a volley of deep, booming barks before suddenly taking off with such a powerful surge he ripped the leash right out of Darcy's hand and tipped her flat on her face in the process.

"You asshole dog!" she yelled furiously, clutching at the bag beside her, praying the vodka bottle hadn't smashed. It was boxed and well wrapped - when she shook the package, there was no telltale tinkling of glass. She breathed a sigh of relief before pushing herself painfully to her feet - Bunny had taken half the skin off her right hand when he yanked the leash away. Clutching the precious package to her, she peered along the shadowy street hopefully.

"Bunny!" she called. "Bunny? Where did you go?"

A deep bark answered her, and she hurried in the direction it came from. Peered cautiously into a darkened alley.

"Bunny? Please tell me you didn't go down here, you idiot dog..."

A huge shadow detached from the even darker shadows, and Darcy completely failed to suppress a small shriek.

The guy was *massive*. Steve-sized, hulking and dark, wearing plain black clothes with a heavy, multi-pocketed jacket over - and he was holding Bunny's leash.

Darcy really hadn't expected what happened next.

"You have my dog," Huge Scary Dude said in a voice that sounded like he'd gargled whiskey and gravel.

Defensive, she snapped back at him "He's *my* dog!" before it dawned on her what he'd said. She blinked.

He'd taken a half step back, melting back into the shadows. Suddenly afraid that he would disappear, Darcy took a tentative step forward herself.

"Wait. Don't - don't go. Did something happen to you, about a year ago, did you... die?"

He was silent, head down. Darcy took another step. "Because I got my soulmark about that time."

"My whole world died," he said in that whisky-and-gravel voice. "And I woke up with one soulmark gone and another one where it had once been. I thought it meant - thought that it meant I'd find Maria again, one day."

She didn't know what to say. He just stood still, in the shadows, and eventually held out Bunny's leash.

"Here. I think you should take him, Buddy's clearly better off with you. He looks great, well fed."

"Buddy," Darcy said, enlightened. "I call him Bunny, it must have sounded enough alike that he responded to the name."

"What kind of ridiculous name is Bunny?"

He smiled, and Darcy, her eyes adjusting to the darkness, realised that her soulmate was a very attractive man indeed, actually, white teeth flashing in his craggy face. Her eyes slid down over broad shoulders, and arrested at the skull she could now make out on his chest.

"Oh my God. You're *him*."

The Punisher froze in the very act of transferring Bunny's - *Buddy's* - leash to her hand. "I think it's best all around if you just forget you ever saw me," he said quietly after a moment.

"What if I don't want to? What if *Buddy* doesn't want to?" Darcy wheedled.

"Why?" He stood dead still, towering over her, staring down at her. An openly curious expression on his face.

"Don't you think there was maybe a *reason*? Your whole world died and so did you, but you came back and were given me for a soulmate. You're a whole new person now, not the same man who was soulmate to Maria. You're soulmate to *me*, and that means I'm meant for *you*, the you who you are *now*. The Punisher." Darcy still couldn't quite believe it, but she kept talking because he was just standing there, his hand over hers on Buddy's leash, listening to her, and she had the feeling that if she didn't convince him now he'd just melt away into the shadows and she'd never see him again.

"I don't know the *why* of you and me, but I believe there's a reason for everything that happens, this included. And I don't want to walk away before figuring out what that reason might be. I don't want to give up without ever even trying."

"You know who I am, *what* I am. What are *you*, that you don't look at me with revulsion for all the blood on my hands?"

Darcy gave him a small smile, very tentatively reached out and put her other hand over his. "You're not my only friend who fights and kills bad people. My name is Darcy Lewis and I work for the Avengers PR department."

Startled, he reared back a little. "The Avengers?"

"That's right. They do exactly what you do - on a larger scale. Cleaning up the world of scum, instead of just Hell's Kitchen. Maybe they could find a place for you with them?"

He cocked his head, gave her that grin again. "I think you're bein' hopelessly optimistic, Darcy."

"Obviously, that's why I'm your soulmate." She looked down at Buddy, sitting at their feet, looking up at her with his tongue lolling out. "That, and the fact that we apparently both have the same excellent taste in dogs?"

***Chapter 39*: A Fairytale Ending (Mack/Beth)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/MackBeth_zps75s5df.jpg-REPLACE_ME

"Bubble, bubble, toil and trouble," Beth said to the coffee machine as it burbled and spat at her. "Stop it, you beastly thing!" She'd had enough. Really, she had. Stepping deftly around the reaching hands of her usual morning groper as she plonked his coffee down in front of him, she whisked her apron off and tossed it on the counter along with her name badge.

"Be seein' ya, Beth," her boss said. "Sure you won't change your mind?"

She shook her head, scooping her bag from under the counter. "New York's too much for a simple country girl like me, Jimmy. Thanks for everything, though."

He nodded, already busy with the next order as she headed out the door without a backwards glance.

Back at her apartment, she packed up her last few things. It was dark without the light from the boarded-up skylight. That had really been the last straw, a few days ago, when a man with a neat bullet hole in the centre of his forehead fell through the skylight and landed dead on her bed in the middle of the night. The only reason she hadn't been crushed (and showered with glass) was that she'd heard the nearby gunfire and taken shelter in the tiny windowless bathroom.

She'd recognised The Punisher's handiwork, of course. Combined with Jessica Jones falling off a building onto her parked car the week before, leaving a significant dent in the hood, and Daredevil having a fight with some bad guys who'd shot out almost every window in her building the week before that - well, Hell's Kitchen, indeed the whole of New York, seemed to be out to get Beth Jackson, and she was just done with it. She lugged her bags down to her dented car and dumped them in the trunk before dropping the keys off to the super. He already had someone else happy to rent her tiny loft, broken skylight and all.

Shaking her head, Beth climbed into her car, starting it up. She'd filled it up with gas the day before, ready for the first leg of her long journey home to Kansas.

"Pity I can't just click my heels three times and say 'There's no place like home', eh, Toto?" she said to the cactus sitting in a pot on the front seat beside her. "Ah well. Let's shake this big city dust from our boots and head back to the wide green spaces, hmm?"

Toto, as usual, made no reply.

The further west she drove, the more her spirits lifted. Green spaces became more than just scattered parks, became fields and farms as she drove through Pennsylvania, broadened into wide open spaces as she pushed on into Ohio.

She'd saved enough to stay in basic roadside motels along the way, took it easy. No rush, for the first time in years. No hurry to be anywhere at any given time. New York had always been one giant rush, it seemed to her now, looking back as though at a distant dream. Perhaps she'd miss that, a little. The feeling of always being busy. Always something new happening, new people to meet, excitement just around the corner...

"You only just left, Beth!" she reproached herself with a laugh, "don't start missing the rat race already!" Reaching for the stereo, she unplugged her phone and the hip-hip music she had playing, fiddled with the radio until she found something country. Drove on singing along to Johnny Cash and Kenny Taylor, voices from her childhood.

She'd stopped for gas at a rest stop just after the Ohio/Illinois border when it happened. A monstrous red creature came bounding across the interstate, flinging cars aside like confetti, and into the gas station.

Just emerging from the ladies' restroom, Beth froze. The monster had just landed on top of her car, crushing it completely, grabbed up the gas fill hose and shoved it into its mouth.

"Oh, fuck my *life*," she said aloud. "That's my goddamn car, you asshole!"

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"Right there!" Daisy shouted, leaning perilously close to the open quinjet hatch. Mack grabbed onto her belt.

"Easy, tiger! And you, no sparks until we get the thing away from the goddamn gas station!" he pointed at Lincoln, who nodded hastily.

"Get us down!" May called to the pilot, who set them down as close as he could get before hastily lifting off again to a safe distance.

Beth couldn't believe her eyes. That was a SHIELD quinjet, exactly like the one that had crashed almost atop her cafe in the Battle of New York. "You bastards again!" she shouted, completely at the end of her tether. "Are you fucking following me? Am I some kind of trouble magnet for weird shit?"

"Her," May pointed at the slender blonde woman who was standing, hands on her hips, shouting something amidst the chaos of screaming, fleeing civilians around her. "Get her out of here, Mack! Daisy, get that beast out into the open!"

Beth stared, open-mouthed, as two tiny dark-haired women went sprinting across the parking lot, one of them flinging up her hands in a strange gesture that sent the red monster flying away from her - now sadly very crushed - car. A tall blond man jogged after them more slowly, and the fourth member of their party, a massive black guy carrying a weird-ass weapon that looked like a cross between a shotgun and an axe, came running - straight at *her*.

She never knew what came over her. But Beth Jackson had had quite enough of screaming and running away. She stood her ground, staring up at the huge guy as he skidded to a stop in front of her.

"Come on, miss, we gotta get you outta here."

Beth's mouth opened, and then closed again.

"Come on, it's really not safe!" Mack grabbed for her arm with his free hand, chancing a glance back over his shoulder. Daisy and May had managed to lure the Thing out into a field and

Sparkplug was doing a nice job of frying it, so maybe he had a moment. The pretty blonde wasn't moving, though. He pulled more firmly on her arm.

"Well, now I've met you, maybe the weird shit will finally stop," Beth said, wonderingly.

Mack froze, his head snapping back to look down at her. "What did you say?" he asked disbelievingly.

She smiled, bright and sunny. "Though since you're apparently with SHIELD, maybe not. Maybe I really am just destined for a life of Weird Shit."

"I thought that was me. Since I have a remark about *weird shit* scrawled on my lower back. That's why I joined SHIELD." He looked her over incredulously. "I thought you'd probably be *with* SHIELD... and what do you mean, maybe the weird shit will *stop*? If you're really my soulmate, it's probably only just *beginning*!"

Beth couldn't help but grin up at him. The monster's screams were faint and weak now as the tall blond kept pouring electricity into it from his hands and the two small women filled it full of lead. Reaching up - waaaaay up, holy *shit* he was *huge* - she put a light hand on Mack's cheek, her slim fingers curving along his jaw.

"Seems like I can't fight destiny. I just hope you guys have a coffee machine that hasn't taken on a life of its own."

"Sentient coffee machines?" Mack said blankly. "No, no we don't... for God's sake, don't suggest it to Fitz, though!"

Beth gave him a cheerful grin. "Excellent. Um," she gestured at her thoroughly crushed car, taking a moment to mourn the inevitable loss of Toto - there was no way that the cactus had survived - "that *was* my car. So I'm hoping I can trouble you for a lift?"

Daisy came trotting up at that moment, smiling with satisfaction. "All done. Zephyr One will be here shortly with the cleanup crew. Who's this?" She gave Beth a pleasant, if wary, smile.

"This is my soulmate," Mack said wonderingly. "I... didn't get your name, yet."

"Beth. Beth Jackson." She smiled up at him, a really very pretty smile, he couldn't help but notice, reaching to take her hand in his own. "Ordinary waitress and apparently a magnet for supernatural trouble. But since I've found my very own Prince Charming with his, erm, shotgun-axe?" she eyed the odd weapon curiously before grinning up at Mack again, "Really, I'm hoping my life has taken a turn for the better. Considering the state of my car, I'm not sure it could get much worse."

Daisy burst out laughing. "Oh, I like you," she told Beth with a grin. "You'll keep Mack on his toes."

"I do hope not," Beth grinned back at her mischievously. "I'm already gonna need to find a box to stand on to kiss him!"

### **\*Chapter 40\*: A Flesh And Blood Woman (Sam/Pepper)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/SpicyFalcon\\_zpssqgphrf8.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/SpicyFalcon_zpssqgphrf8.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

*Backstory; Tony and Pepper broke up sometime between the events of IM3 and AoU - why she wasn't in his dream, and why she didn't turn up to cut him off at the knees in AoU. He's hiding it from everyone because he wasn't ready to admit it. Post AoU, he comes clean and finds his own soulmate - I'm thinking this could fit with Tony/May simply because I rather like that*

*pairing :P.*

*Anyway. There's yet another party at the Tower to celebrate an Avengers victory. Because, Tony says, Steve is too boring to celebrate properly, and he has this big lavish place sitting empty anyway. Amused, they all rock up, and are a little surprised to see Pepper there, but she and Tony are amiable, indeed she's obviously very happy for him.*

"It's good to see you again, Pep," Rhodey was the first to greet her, scooping her up for a bear hug that made her laugh and hit her fists gently on his shoulders.

"Rhodey, you're messing my dress!"

"Heaven forbid," he let her drop back to her immaculately heeled feet with a chuckle.

"Get out of the way, you lump," Natasha elbowed him sharply aside, gathered Pepper into an elegant, sisterly embrace. "It is good to see you again, *shalunishka*," she said tenderly, and Pepper leaned into her with a soft smile.

"You too, Nat. You look *fabulous*," she eyed Natasha's upswept do with a connoisseur's eye. "Full-time Avenging obviously agrees with you. Or maybe it's just the absence of Tony and his habit of derailing every plan you come up with."

Natasha chuckled at that. "He had his moments, but we'd be glad to have him with us at any time, Pepper. You know that. You too."

For a moment Pepper looked thoughtful, but then she shook her head. "I enjoy what I'm doing, Nat," she linked her arm through the redhead's, drew her away towards the bar.

"What did Natasha mean, we'd be happy to have Pepper with us?" Sam asked Steve in an undertone as they followed the two women. "I mean, I've heard all about how efficient she is, how she's made SI so much better than it ever was, but - we don't need a manager, do we? Other than Hill? Surely that's enough efficiency under one roof?" He gave Steve a mock terrified look.

Steve grinned back at him. "Just because Hill organises you with even more ruthless efficiency than the Air Force ever did."

"Truth," Sam admitted.

"But that's not what Nat meant." Steve looked around to check nobody was listening to them. "You read up on Tony's incident with Aldrick Killian and that Extremis stuff?"

"Killian's War, yeah. That was well before I got mixed up with you lot," Sam nodded.

"Well, what was never made public was that Killian dosed Pepper with Extremis."

Sam reared back, startled. "But that stuff was lethal to everyone who got it! There were vets exploding all over the goddamn place from that shit!"

"Tony and Bruce figured out a way to stabilise Pepper, after everything was over."

"Stabilise," Sam said, picking up on the crucial word, "not *cure*?"

Steve nodded to tell Sam he'd got the point. "She still has it. In her own way, she's more lethal than any of us."

"Jeez," Sam said, looking at the tall, elegant strawberry blonde smiling with Natasha at the bar as Natasha mixed them suspiciously lethal-looking cocktails. "But she's not interested in being an Avenger?"

"Oddly enough," Steve said thoughtfully, "I don't think anyone's ever asked. Tony's first instinct has always been to protect her. But the Extremis has very likely altered at least some of *her* instincts, and I don't think Pepper was ever any kind of shrinking violet anyway. Quite possibly that contributed to their breakup. Perhaps she didn't like being wrapped in cotton wool?"

“That definitely ain’t the kind of woman you wrap in cotton wool,” Sam said emphatically, looking at the six-inch spike Jimmy Choo stilettos at the end of Pepper’s impossibly long, slender legs. “Put on a pedestal and worship as a goddess, maybe.”

Steve’s elbow connected lightly with his ribs, and the bigger man said in a teasing voice “Sammy’s got a *cruuuush*.”

“What are you, twelve?” Sam rolled his eyes at Steve. “Get real. Woman like that’s way outta my league.”

“Of course she ain’t,” Steve gave him a startled look.

“Steve, look at her. Classy rich white dame like that, Ms. Potts can have any man she wants. She ain’t gonna be interested in a guy like me. A *black* guy like me,” Sam clarified when Steve looked blank.

“That’s ridiculous,” Steve said, angry on Sam’s behalf, but Sam just shook his head and turned away, looking for someone else to talk to. Steve just didn’t get it. He didn’t have a prejudiced bone in his body, God bless him, he just didn’t get how it worked. He hadn’t lived Sam’s life.

Though Sam couldn’t help a wistful look at Pepper as she smiled and hugged Clint. She was the most beautiful woman he’d ever seen, no question. And those legs... he lost himself in fantasies about those endless, glorious legs for a few blissful moments before shaking himself out of it.

About an hour later, he was nursing his third beer, listening to one of Rhodey’s stories - the man did have an excellent comic sense of timing, but Sam had heard them all before - when he felt a very light touch on his wrist.

Turning with a slight smile, he saw Romanoff beckoning to him, followed her away from the group and out onto the roof. Pepper was standing there alone, close to the edge, her hair blowing in the breeze, classically beautiful features lit up by the bright lights of Manhattan behind her.

“Pep wanted to meet you,” Natasha said cheerfully, and promptly did that spooky thing of melting into the shadows and vanishing that Sam could never quite figure out. Although maybe this time it was because his eyes were glued to the glory of the woman at the edge of the roof, just turning around and smiling at him.

“Hey,” he said, suddenly feeling like the dorkiest dork ever to dork. His legs wouldn’t work. Or his hands. Or indeed his eyelids. He couldn’t even blink as she came towards him, graceful even on those impossible shoes, smiling.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Sam.”

That did make him blink. “Guh?” he said questioningly.

Pepper tilted her head, her hand poised in mid-air in an offered shake. “Are you all right?”

Sam said “Guh” again before his brain engaged properly. *Impossible. Clearly and completely impossible*. “I’m sorry. You startled me a bit. You said my soulmate words, and I’m already completely floored by how incredibly beautiful you are,” he apologised, accepting her offered hand to shake.

He was quite unprepared for the way her slender fingers suddenly tightened hard on his, her hand getting very hot, her blue eyes flashing orange for an instant.

“My soulmark says ‘Hey’,” she told him.

Sam’s brain shorted out completely as Pepper took a small step back, letting go of his

hand, and *hitched up her skirt* -- her already-short skirt -- to show even *more* smooth, slender thigh.

"It's not much of a sample," Pepper said, with a decided gleam of amusement in her eyes for the effect she was clearly having on Sam. "Perhaps you could show me yours?"

He was too busy trying, and failing, not to stare at those gorgeous thighs, at the three scribbled letters in what he was pretty sure was his handwriting, to register for a moment what she'd just said. And then he was very glad his skin was too dark to show a blush.

"It's, um, it's in a similar spot to yours," he admitted, "but since I'm not wearing a skirt and I think Stark might object if I dropped my pants in the middle of a party..."

"Tony would be in no position to throw stones, believe me," Pepper gave him a grin, and Sam realised she was teasing him.

"I'd be only too happy to give you a *private* showing, of course, Ms. Potts," he teased back. "Any time."

"I'm pretty sure I don't need one," moving to his side, Pepper linked her arm in his, leaned in to whisper in his ear. "Because if someone asked me to describe my perfect dream man, I think I could just show them a picture of you, Sam Wilson."

"I'm pretty sure that I'm already *in* the best dream of my life," Sam confessed, "but please, don't ever wake me up."

"Not a chance," Pepper promised. He was still gazing at her far too reverently, though, so she decided to give him some tangible proof that she was in fact very much real, a thoroughly flesh and blood woman. Leaning in closer, she hooked her free hand behind his neck and kissed him warmly.

"God damn it," Tony grouched, just inside the glass doors. "You've really got to stop bringing home these waifs and strays, Cap. This one's stolen Pepper!"

## **\*Chapter 41\*: Not Such A Smooth Criminal (Scott Lang/Wanda Ma...**

*Inspired by the latest Civil War trailer which you can see [here](#).*

And specifically by that moment at about 30 seconds where you see Wanda make THIS face.

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20AntWitch\\_zpsxibcay5r.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20AntWitch_zpsxibcay5r.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

*Aided and abetted by Marvelfanuniverse who wanted Scott and Clint on a cross-country bro!trip. Couldn't resist adding a bit of that in at the start!*

He kind of liked Scott, Clint decided about six hours into the drive. The guy had a sense of humor, anyway. One that was quite likely to get him killed, but hey, Clint skated that line too. And once Scott started talking about his daughter, and Clint admitted Lila was about the same age as Scott's Cassie, they'd really bonded. Even if they didn't have at all the same taste in music.

"Seriously?" Scott sighed as Clint climbed back into the driver's seat and promptly plugged his phone back into the stereo. "Not more country music?"

"Driver picks the tunes, we agreed that at the outset," Clint pointed out firmly. "Since you've spent the last two hours inflicting Michael Jackson on my poor ears, it is most definitely my turn."

"I thought you liked MJ! You were singing along!" Scott protested.

"Only to *Smooth Criminal*," Clint said slyly, making Scott chuckle and shake his head.

"All right. I've got a couple of non-country playlists as well. How about some rock?"

"What, exactly?" Scott asked warily. "Because if your idea of rock music is Nickelback, I'd rather stick with Faith Hill, much though I thought I'd never hear myself say those words."

"Thanks but no thanks, I'm more of a classics man," Clint poked at his phone to choose a playlist. Grinned at Scott's pleasantly surprised expression at the first bars of '*Gimme Shelter*'. "Gonna sing along?"

By the time they hit Denver, they were both headbanging along to *Bohemian Rhapsody* and telling each other about their most daring cat-burglary exploits.

Scott wasn't the greatest traveller, though, Clint thought. He was willing enough but twice Clint caught him nodding at the wheel and made him switch. Guy liked his sleep. And his coffee.

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The van door banging open woke Scott from his sound doze, and he started upright to see Clint looking in at him with a wry grin. *God, had they arrived already?* Clearly Hawkeye's hidden superpower was that he was a damn driving machine.

"Ugh, what time zone is this?" he asked Clint plaintively, scrambling up and out of the van. He got a jerk of the head in reply - evidently Hawkeye was all talked out for the week - and then a shove on the shoulder.

"Go on."

Peripherally, he noticed a beautiful brunette girl beside the van, who Clint moved towards, but his attention was suddenly grabbed by the really big blond man in a too-tight grey T-shirt standing facing him, hands on hips.

"Captain America!" Amazingly, Scott got the words out without stuttering.

"Mr Lang."

He called me MISTER oh my God CAPTAIN AMERICA called ME mister. "It's an honour!" Scott gasped out, shaking his hand. "I'm shaking your hand too long," he realised, a few moments later. Cap nodded at him with a raised eyebrow and he hastily let go. "Wow. This is awesome!"

I must be the least cool human being on the planet. Chill, Scott. You knew this was coming.

Although not right after I woke up, shit, my hair's probably all over the place...

"Captain America!" He had to turn away from all that intimidating blond perfection for a moment. Looked back at the beautiful brunette, suddenly realised who she had to be. *The Scarlet Witch!* "I know you, too! You're great!" But he was being rude, he'd just turned his back on *Captain America*. Hastily, he turned back again.

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Wanda couldn't believe it.

*My soulmate words. He just said my soulmate words.*

*And he's now fanboying over Steve and patting his muscles.*

"*Bozhe moi*," she muttered under her breath, making Clint look at her strangely.

"Wanda? Everything all right?"

She tried to give him a smile, but Clint, who had appointed himself her unofficial guardian and father figure, saw right through her.

"Everything's not all right. What's wrong?" He put a protective arm around her, guided her away from the others, around to the other side of the van.

Wanda tried to claim it was nothing. She was already determined to avoid Scott. She was no fit person to be anyone's soulmate, even if Scott was actually interested in her. Which he clearly wasn't. Clint, though, clearly didn't buy her act and her claims that she was just worried about their situation. His penetrating gaze said she hadn't heard the last of this.

She made sure to ride in the van beside Clint while Scott was obviously determined to keep fanboying over Steve in the other vehicle. She'd avoid him, she decided. It wouldn't be too difficult. And if she *had* to speak to him at some point, well, she'd just have to make sure that she just something as innocuous as possible. Like 'hi'. Or maybe 'excuse me'.

Settling back into the seat, resolution made, she was just drifting off to sleep when Clint said "Are y'gonna tell me what's bothering you, or will I have to just hug you until you spill?"

Wanda let out a sleepy snort of laughter. Clint was an amazing listener, she'd found, but in the early days of their friendship she hadn't felt up to talking much. So he would just put his arms around her in an amazingly warm, comforting hug until the tension flowed out of her body and the words began tumbling from her lips.

"It's nothing important," she tried to palm him off.

"Wanda, you were perfectly fine when I arrived. Don't think I haven't learned to read your body language by now. Then Scott started fawning over Steve and you quietly lost your shit. The only guess I've got at the moment is that he said your soulmate words?" Clint's words ended on an interrogative note, making Wanda groan aloud.

"Sometimes I think it's you with the ability to read minds, not me!"

Clint smirked, satisfied. "Just people, darlin'. Just people. Hard-earned, too. So he *is* your soulmate. Good. He's a good guy, y'know. Got the most beautiful little girl."

That startled Wanda bolt upright. "A daughter?"

"Yeah, he was married for a while, to his childhood sweetheart. She found her soulmate and he... well, it's a long story, but now he's Ant-Man, and he's worth havin' on our side. His little girl's just Lila's age. Cute as a button." Clint glanced sideways at her. "Don't judge him by that first meetin', darlin'. Wait and see."

She slumped down in her seat again, closing her eyes. Arguing with Clint was completely pointless, she'd learned that by now. "Yes, *dad*," she muttered sulkily, unable to see Clint's fond smile at her attitude.

She still planned to avoid speaking to Scott for as long as possible. Something held her back from peeking into his mind; she supposed that she didn't want to be disillusioned too soon, to see the darkness in her soulmate's soul that must surely match her own.

And she still planned to say something innocuous, to keep him from realising that they were soulmates for as long as possible. Clint would respect her wish for that. She hoped.

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When it came down to it, she didn't have time to think about what to say, though. Because Scott was completely oblivious to the fact that his head was about to get taken off by the Black Panther.

"Go small, Scott!" she yelled at him and he obeyed instinctively, allowing her to hit

T'Challa with an energy blast and deflect him away.

"I've been wondering what those words mean for so long," Scott popped back up in front of her, fixing her with an accusing stare.

"Can we talk about it later?" Wanda yelled, taking off and intercepting Vision.

"Bet your gorgeous ass we will, missy!" Scott yelled after her.

When it was all over, when Steve and Tony were finally TALKING instead of sulking at each other, Wanda found Scott right in front of her with an unusually serious look on his mobile, expressive face.

"Can we talk?"

She sighed, pushed herself wearily to her feet. "I suppose we should."

It was late, and felt oddly romantic, walking together under the starlight. Wanda had the distinct feeling that Scott was having to restrain himself from reaching for her hand. Surprisingly for such a voluble man, he had a quiet mind; his thoughts were buried deep. She didn't have to work hard to keep herself from picking up stray emotions.

"So I'm guessing it was when I was being a dumb fanboy over Cap," Scott said after they'd walked a short way. "I vaguely remember saying something to you, too. Was it insulting?"

Wanda smiled up at the sky. "Not really. You said 'I know you, too. You're great!'," but it was the way you immediately turned back to Steve and started feeling up his muscles that threw me for a loop."

Scott winced. "Jeez, I'm such a moron. No wonder you avoided me like I had the plague. Thanks for saving my life earlier, by the way."

She shrugged. "You returned the favour." He had indeed, and more than once.

Scott did reach for her hand, then. "I'm sorry I was an ass. I seem to be real good at starting off on the wrong foot with people I admire. Hell, ask Sam!"

That made her smile. "You're forgiven. I had to fight quite hard not to fangirl over Natasha, when first we met," she confessed. Looking up at him - he wasn't a particularly tall man, but he still had a few inches on her - she said "Are you sure you want to stay mixed up with the Avengers, Scott? With me? You know all about my past, now..."

"The *only* thing that gives me pause," he stopped walking and turned to face her, "is that at some point, I'm pretty sure Hawkeye is gonna give me the shovel talk to end all shovel talks. And having seen him kick ass and take names today with just a bow and arrows, I'll believe every word of it."

Wanda's clear laugh rang out. "He really isn't my father. He just acts like it." Stepping closer to Scott, she reached up to put her hands on his shoulders. "And there is one advantage to that. He likes to have a sleep after a hard day. So right now, he's passed out cold." One eyebrow arched in invitation.

Scott was no fool. "That sounds like a very useful snippet of information." His arms slid stealthily around Wanda's waist, his head bending towards hers. Their lips had barely brushed when the earpieces they were both still wearing crackled to life.

"*I've got a laser sight trained right between your shoulder-blades, Ant-Man. You just keep those hands right where they are.*"

"I'm pretty sure he's just practicing for Lila," Wanda said between giggles as Scott started swearing under his breath.

"*Damn right.*"

"Go practice someplace else, Hawkeye," Scott said irritably, and then suddenly

brightened. “On the other hand...” Quickly, he spun Wanda around, so that they were facing in the opposite direction. “There. Now you’ve got two choices. Shoot me *through* her, or shut up and watch.”

“Or on the other hand, *not* watch,” Wanda put in determinedly, before pulling her earpiece out and tossing it away. Scott quickly followed suit.

“First kisses are definitely best without an audience,” he said with a slightly nervous smile.

“Yes,” Wanda agreed, “and since this is my *very* first kiss...”

Wide-eyed, Scott gulped. “Okay. No pressure, Scott, no pressure...”

She tightened her arms around his neck and pulled his face down to hers. About five minutes later, when they finally parted, she smiled softly up at him, her eyes shining as bright as the stars above them.

“You did fine, Scott. Just fine.”

***Chapter 42*: Awww, Day, No (Clint/Joey Gutierrez)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/HawkJoey_zpsggn1b0na.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“I quit SHIELD to get away from all this bullshit!” Joey yelled furiously, and futilely, at the spaceship crashing into a building *right in fucking front of him*. In *Miami*. He was willing to admit that, yes, all sorts of weird shit went down in Miami, but crashing alien spaceships were normally reserved for New York or Wakanda or something.

Heaving a sigh, he gave up on waiting for his date - the guy certainly wasn’t going to show now! - and started sprinting towards the crash. Hopefully the thing was made out of metal he could manipulate, and if not, well, there was rebar in concrete. He was pretty sure he could help one way or another.

“*Madre de Dios*,” he muttered under his breath as he got closer. *What a mess*. The spaceship wasn’t as big as it had looked from a distance, in fact he wasn’t even sure that it was actually a spaceship - it looked sort of like an incredibly-advanced quinjet. It had crashed into a low-rise office building, maybe five stories, hopefully pretty much empty of people late on a Sunday afternoon, though there were a lot of folks milling around and screaming.

“Run away! *¡Escapar!*” he shouted, pointing back along the street, and at least some people listened to him, almost stampeding away. Others got caught up in the rush and Joey actually had to flatten himself against the side of a building for a moment to avoid being swept up, before he could carry on towards the crash site. Since nothing was on fire, yet at least, he took a few moments to shout at stragglers and gawpers who hadn’t yet fled.

Arriving at the crash site, he paused to stare upwards with narrowed eyes. The spaceship, aircraft, whatever it was, was half-embedded in the third floor of the building. Joey reckoned at least half of its mass was in mid-air, though, and judging from the tortured sounds of stressed metal and concrete from the building, it was quite likely to tip back out under its own weight and come crashing down on the roadway pretty soon.

Unless, of course, Joey did something about it. He looked around for something to get closer, scrambled to the top of a convenient SUV and bent a lamp-post down to climb on. Raising it back up again was harder, but he clenched his fists and concentrated until he was

almost close enough to touch the wrecked craft.

It was too heavy for him to manipulate the whole thing. Maybe if Daisy were here, she could help, but right now Joey was on his own. *Engines*, he thought, *engines are heavy*.

Whatever the mystery flying machine was, it was made of metal, and a metal he could manipulate. Concentrating on the wings, where there were surely less likely to be any survivors, he concentrated on shifting the centre of gravity of the whole machine forward while keeping the wings attached, the engines balling up and crunching forward, deeper into the building.

Joey was concentrating so hard he didn't even hear the other jet swooping in for a landing behind him, or notice the occupants disembarking to stare up at him.

"This," Clint said to Steve, "is new."

"What," Steve said jokingly, "you've never seen a guy standing on top of a lamp-post in the middle of Miami using some kind of metal-magic before?"

"Nup, it's a new one on me. He's cute, though. We should totally recruit him."

"I was thinking that we should *help* him," Vision said dryly, swooping up off the ground to stand in mid-air beside Joey. "Excuse me?"

Startled, Joey let out a yell, lost his balance as he instinctively tried to step back, and fell off the lamp-post. Steve promptly stepped forward and neatly caught him.

"Goddammit," Clint grumbled, "you have all the luck, catching hot guys falling out of the sky."

"Hot damn," Joey mumbled dazedly, staring up at Steve, "maybe I don't mind the crazy shit expanding to Miami so much after all."

Blushing, Steve hastily set him on his feet. "I'll just go, um, help Vision. Yeah. Seems like your type," he said in an aside to Clint.

"What, cute and gay?" Clint said to his back, rolling his eyes as Steve leaped agilely up to the hole in the side of the building. Turning back to Joey, he smiled and stuck out his hand. "Hi."

"You think I'm cute?" Joey said, still a bit stunned, as he took Clint's hand.

Clint startled and his grip tightened. He peered at Joey, startled. "I don't suppose your soulmark says 'Hi', does it?"

Wide-eyed, Joey stared back at him before looking up at the sky. "*Muchas gracias*," he said fervently before looking back at Clint. "Yes. Yes it does."

"This *totally* makes up for me remote-control crashing a quinjet into an office building!" A broad grin split Clint's face. "I was thinking it was gonna be just another 'Awww, day, no,' kind of day, but here you are all cute and superpowered!"

"*You* crashed that jet?" Joey looked up at the wrecked building behind them.

"Let's talk about that later," Clint grabbed his arm hastily and turned him away. "Let's go find something to eat. I want pizza. Do you like pizza? And tell me, how do you feel about dogs?"

***Chapter 43*: You're Going To Be Trouble (Pietro Maximoff/Ele...**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Slingsilver_zps6re5avkp.jpg-REPLACE_ME

"Wait. Are you saying you know a speedster too?" Clint traded a gleeful look with Sam.

“Really?”

“Yes, but it’s not the same as Maximoff,” Joey said. “She snaps back to the starting point. She might be even quicker than him, though,” he mused, “over the short distance.”

“Now this, we *have* to see,” Sam said. “Give her a call, Joey. Go on. Pietro really needs taking down a peg or two.”

“Or sixteen,” Wanda remarked dryly, pinching Sam’s ass as she passed. He jumped and yelped, but Joey could see a pleased little grin playing around the corners of Falcon’s mouth.

“Well, if Wanda thinks it’s all right...” Joey liked Wanda, a lot. She reminded him of Daisy. “I guess I could give Elena a call.”

Clint gave him puppy-dog eyes, a look he already knew made Joey’s knees feel a bit weak. “When you do, can I make a suggestion?”

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“¿*Los Vengadores?*” Elena’s screech down the phone almost popped Joey’s eardrum. He held the phone away for a moment, laughing.

“*Sí, Yoyo. Yo tampoco lo puedo creer, pero es verdad. Ojo de Halcón es mi alma gemela.*”

“¿*Felicidades!*” Elena exclaimed, and he could tell she was truly happy for him.

“¿*Vendrás a visitarme?*”

“*Me encantaría,*” she chuckled. “¿*Simplemente intenta mantenerme lejos! Quiero competir con Quicksilver.*”

“*Sobre eso,*” Joey glanced around, lowered his voice, “*Tengo una idea.*”

~~~~~

“So when is your friend arriving, Joey?” Pietro asked, throwing himself onto the couch opposite Joey and grabbing up an apple from the bowl in the middle of the table, polishing it on his shirt before crunching down loudly.

“Any time now,” Joey replied with a nonchalant shrug, sharing a secret grin with Clint.

“And is she pretty?” Pietro’s grin was wolfish. “Because this place is distinctly lacking in beautiful, single women for me to practice my English on.”

Wanda cuffed the back of his head on her way past. “Your English is fine.”

“My Spanish, then. You said she was Columbian?”

“Yes. You speak Spanish?” Joey said, surprised.

“Yes. Didn’t I tell you?” Wanda’s smirk was curiously smug. “His soulmark’s in Spanish.”

“It is?”

“Yes, it says...” Pietro’s words were cut off by the loud ping of the elevator doors opening. They all stood up, turning to the entryway.

Oh, she is pretty. Pietro’s grin widened as he saw the gorgeous brunette woman stepping out of the elevator. He took a step forward, preparing to pour on the charm.

It was as though the whole world shifted around him. Normally, everyone seemed to be moving in slow motion to Pietro - but now it was *he* who moved in slow motion, compared to the incredible swiftness of Elena as she sped forward, stooped to slap *something* onto his ankles, and sprang back to her starting point.

“What the hell just happened?” Pietro gaped, moved to take a step forward, and fell flat

on his face, to the sound of hysterical laughter from Clint, Joey, Wanda and Sam.

“¿Acaso no lo viste venir?” an amused voice said above his head, and he twisted over to see Elena standing above him.

“Како си то урадила?” he asked, reverting instinctively to his native tongue, and watched her jaw drop.

Growing up poor in Columbia, it hadn't been until Elena was in high school that she'd finally found out what the words on her leg said, and what language they were in. She'd taught herself what she could with the aid of an old Sokovian dictionary she found in a library, and more since regular internet access became available with the aid of an online language program. Going to her knees beside Pietro now, she reached to remove the electrostatic cuffs from his ankles, saying;

“Жао ми је.”

“De nada,” he replied, smiling at her as he sat up, and she laughed delightedly. “I am Pietro.”

“Elena. My friends call me Yoyo.”

“They're both pretty, nearly as pretty as you are,” Pietro gathered her hand in his, pressed a light kiss to the back of it. “Estoy muy contento de conocerte.”

“И ја учмо,” Elena responded, realising that the others had quietly left, leaving them alone. He was a beautiful man, her soulmate, with his high Slavic cheekbones, clear blue eyes and unruly shock of white-blond hair. “Yo también.”

Standing up, Pietro drew her to her feet. “My Spanish isn't as good as I'd like,” he admitted. “I have been working harder on my English the last few years. Living in America.”

“Well, I've never actually met a native Sokovian speaker before,” Elena confessed. “I'm sure my accent is horrible.”

“It's lovely,” he denied, eyes roaming over her face. “Everything about you is lovely.”

Elena fought down a blush. Pietro was a good few inches taller than she was, standing close as he looked down at her, her hand still held closely in his. He drew it against his chest now, his blue eyes hooding as he looked down at her, and she knew he was thinking about kissing her. She was very far from averse to the idea, so she swayed a little towards him, turning her face up and letting her eyelids drift down.

The kiss was so fast she barely registered it had happened, but for the firm pressure she could still feel on her lips. Her eyes snapped open to see his cheeky grin.

“You're going to be trouble, aren't you?”

“I don't think you'd want me any other way,” Pietro grinned back at her. “But hey. At least you'll be able to keep up!”

***Chapter 44*: Running Away With You (Pietro Maximoff/Kitty Pr...**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/QuickShadow_zps2tpo9xzv.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“OK, son, so here's the plan,” Steve glanced across at Pietro.

“Will you stop calling me *son*?” Pietro sighed, rolling his eyes. “I'm actually only about eight years younger than you are. And since Barnes delights in telling us all about your complete

failure to talk to women back in the day, there is absolutely no possibility that I could be your son, grandson or any other descendant of yours.”

Wanda snickered behind them. “He is still no good at talking to women. And it seems to have rubbed off on Bucky, more’s the pity.”

“You don’t normally complain that I don’t talk much,” Bucky remarked dryly from the tree above them where he lay on a branch, sniper rifle at the ready.

“You do *other* good things with your mouth,” Wanda replied with a sultry little laugh.

“Please don’t!” Pietro covered his ears miserably. “I don’t want to hear it!”

“I don’t want to hear anything, you lot chatter like magpies,” Bucky muttered, putting his eye back to his scope. “They know the plan, Stevie. Stop worrying.”

Steve huffed and shook his head, a rueful little smile playing about his lips, at least until Bucky swore from the branch above them.

“Holy shit, there’s a *kid* in there!”

“What?” all three of the team members waiting below snapped upright, looking up at him.

“Has to be, too small to be an adult...”

“We gotta get in there!” Steve turned, about to start running down the hillside, glanced around and froze. “Pietro?”

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The second Bucky had mentioned that there was a kid in trouble, Pietro was gone. He and Wanda had been stupid enough to *volunteer* for Hydra’s experiments, not that they’d had any idea who they were working with or what they were getting into. But a kid... no. That *couldn’t* be voluntary.

They already knew that the building was secured, but at his top speed he was capable of literally running up the side of buildings, and he used that skill to good effect now, sprinting up the side and using his momentum to smash his way in through an attic-level window before speeding through the building. There were only so many rooms Bucky could have spotted the kid in...

... *there*. A *girl*, no less; he snatched her off her feet and sped from the room, so fast that the two men in there with her stared about in utter bemusement.

Getting out was far easier than getting in; he just shifted the girl’s slight body in his arms and unlocked the front door before dashing out and back up the hill, setting her on her feet in front of Steve with a flourish.

At which point she slapped his face.

“You stupid *putz*!”

Pietro’s jaw dropped open with shock. He’d been waiting since he was a small boy for someone to say those words to him. Which meant... he stared hard at the girl scowling up at him. No, she definitely wasn’t a child. She was just no bigger than one.

Wanda began to laugh. “Oh, Pietro. Papa always did say that you needed to bring home a nice Jewish girl.” She reached out and touched, with gentle fingers, the star of David hanging at the girl’s throat.

“I’m sure he didn’t mean by kidnapping one!” Kitty shouted, jerking back from the laughing dark-haired girl, glaring up at the white-haired man who’d swept her away from the computer she’d been busy hacking in the Hydra safehouse.

“Well, you don’t know our father,” Pietro said, and then winced, realising that she must have really stupid soulwords. On the other hand, she’d called him a stupid *putz*...

“No, but you’re about to meet *my* adoptive fathers,” Kitty said with a certain vindictive relish. Remy and Logan were storming up the hillside behind them, and she could see Logan’s claws were out, playing cards fanned between Remy’s fingers ready to throw.

“Wait, that’s Wolverine!” Steve said, startled. Kitty spun around to stare up at him.

“And *you’re* Captain America!” She flung up a hand to stop Logan and Remy from immediately attacking. “What are *you* doing here?”

“We came to take this Hydra safehouse, but I’m thinking maybe you got here ahead of us,” Steve said.

Pietro was almost hopping from foot to foot with excitement. Wanda put a steadying hand on his arm. “Patience,” she told him softly.

Logan and Remy approached warily, eyes on Steve. “Rogers,” Logan greeted cautiously. “What’s going on?”

“A case of mistaken identity. Barnes saw the young lady here and assumed from her size that she was a child,” Steve gestured at Kitty apologetically. She *harrumphed* in disgust. “And Maximoff jumped the gun.”

“A daring rescue, *mon petit chat*,” Remy said in amusement. “Didn’t I hear you wishing just the other week for some handsome young man to come and sweep you off your feet?”

Kitty’s cheeks flamed. “That’s - that’s not what I meant!”

“It’s what you got,” Wanda pointed out, eyes dancing with laughter. “Your soulmate, no less.”

“What?” Kitty whirled around, eyes wide. “*Oy vey*, you did, you said about your father...”

“And you called me a *putz*,” Pietro pointed out, seeing the funny side and grinning.

Remy burst out laughing and Kitty groaned and covered her face. Seeing her embarrassment, Pietro impulsively swept her up off her feet and sped off with her again. He didn’t stop until they were well out of sight of the others, around the other side of the hill. Kitty swayed when he set her on her feet, so he put his arms back around her to steady her. That was what he told himself, anyway.

“My name is Pietro,” he introduced himself, a little awkwardly, “and I’m sorry I tried to rescue you.” *That came out wrong*, he thought, kicking himself mentally, but his tiny, beautiful soulmate smiled.

“It would have been quite romantic, if I’d actually wanted rescuing the first time. The second time you did a pretty good job. Rescuing me from sinking into the ground with embarrassment,” she clarified when he looked blank. “And my name’s Kitty, by the way. Kitty Pryde.”

“That’s pretty. Like you.” Tentatively, he touched a lock of her straight brown hair. “And I’m not going to say I’m sorry for sweeping you up in my arms and running away with you, this time.”

She grinned up at him. “Good. Because if you did apologise for that, I should have to call you worse names than *putz*.”

This time, when the others caught up with them, they were kissing, Kitty’s arms wound around Pietro’s neck as he held her up against a tree. It took both Remy and Steve to keep Logan from skewering Pietro right then and there.

"I'm sorry about Logan," Kitty whispered to Pietro as they checked out the safehouse again, her small hand held firmly in his.

"That's all right," Pietro smiled down at her. "In a contest of 'who has the most out-there dad', I'm afraid even Wolverine is out of his league!"

### **\*Chapter 45\*: Are You A Magician? (Remy/Beth)**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Bethemy\\_zpsxekzakdv.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/Bethemy_zpsxekzakdv.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

Beth silently cursed herself for having been distracted by the man's pretty face. He really was exceptionally attractive, but that was no excuse. Not when she was being paid to notice things that were out of the ordinary.

Slipping into the cafe, she pulled her phone out of her apron pocket, typed a quick text. She didn't bother trying to take a photograph; there were plenty of nearby surveillance cameras Stark could pull the feed from, that would get a far better image than she might manage to snap without being spotted.

"My section's quiet, I'll take table eight for you, Danica," she said to her co-worker, who only shot her a grateful smile of thanks.

"Cheers, Beth. He already ordered; black coffee, double shot. He'll get two or three, same thing," Danica filled her in before rushing back out with a full tray.

Beth took an order from one of her tables and collected the black coffee for Mr. Handsome, as she'd mentally dubbed him. She couldn't help but admire him as she walked back outside. He was nicely dressed, too, a black silk shirt under a black waistcoat, smart black dress pants, expensive-looking shoes. Brown hair waved smoothly past his collar, outlining the clean line of his profile.

Realising she was staring, Beth shook herself, glanced down at the table. Saw, with surprise, that his hands weren't still in his lap or holding a phone as most people's were. No, Mr. Handsome was idly playing with a deck of cards, flicking them around in his fingers with an uncanny dexterity of an expert street magician.

He wasn't even looking at the cards, Beth realised; was just playing with them as a distraction, his eyes constantly on Avengers Tower and its approaches. Anyone who noticed him would see him playing with the cards first, would assume that he was concentrating on those.

It was hard to look away, actually, the cards flickering around his flying fingers with an almost hypnotic pattern. A little entranced, Beth set the coffee down carefully.

"That's absolutely fascinating. Are you a magician?" she asked.

The cards stalled, spilled, tumbled haphazardly across the tabletop. Dark eyes flicked up to meet hers.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to distract you!" Beth stepped back, mentally kicking herself. She wasn't supposed to draw attention to herself. Why oh *why* hadn't she just set the coffee down and walked away?

Mr Handsome stood, revealing himself to be a good couple of inches clear of six foot and a clear head taller than Beth. Towering over her, he looked down into her eyes and said, in a low, accented voice;

"You are the very best kind of distraction, *chère*."

Beth froze. Mr. Handsome smiled, and reached down to unbutton his shirt cuff, rolling his sleeve up to reveal her hasty, but quite legible, script trailing up the inside of his forearm.

"You are not what I expected to discover, here, but I am not at all dismayed." His large, warm hand curled around hers, and he lifted it, pressed his lips lightly against her knuckles. His eyes never left hers; for an instant there she thought that she saw a red glint deep in his pupils. "I am Remy LeBeau, *chère*, and I am *delighted* to meet you."

People around them, realising that they were witnessing a first meeting of soulmates, began to clap and holler, making Beth blush to the roots of her hair and want to sink right into the pavement. Remy's firm hand on hers, the way he was looking into her eyes, steadied her, though, enabled her to tune out the noisy crowd.

"Beth. Beth Jackson." Her voice was soft; Remy leaned close to hear her. "I'm... I'm very pleased to meet you, too."

"Kiss, kiss!" someone started chanting behind them, until Remy held up a hand. Miraculously, it seemed to Beth, the crowd quieted.

"I'm not about to pressure this lovely lady into something she's not ready for."

"Go take a walk," Danica, coming up behind Beth, untied her apron strings and swept it off her. "Go on," she gave Beth a little push.

Remy offered his arm to Beth with an elegant little flourish. Helplessly, she put her hand on it and let him lead her away down the street.

Towards the Tower, she suddenly realised.

*Goddamn, he's about to use me for an unobtrusive stroll-by to case the place...*

"This way!" she said chirpily, making a sharp left at the corner and almost dragging Remy along with her.

"Wherever you wish, *chère*," Remy said agreeably. He never so much as took his eyes off her, never even glanced towards the Tower, which made Beth feel a little better.

*Surely... surely my soulmate can't be an awful person. **I'm** not an awful person.*

"So where are you from, Remy?" she asked. "I can't quite place the accent..."

"New Orleans," he said. "I'm Cajun. Though mostly I live in upstate New York, these days."

"What brings you to the city?"

"I have to arrange a meeting with someone, but they're a little difficult to pin down," Remy shrugged gracefully. "And you, Beth? You don't have the sound of a native New Yorker."

She smiled at that. "No, I'm just a farm girl from Kansas."

"I don't think you're *just* anything," his gaze was uncomfortably sharp, and she thought she saw that red flash in his pupils for an instant again. "But as long as you don't click your heels three times and disappear back to Kansas in a puff of smoke, I'm fine with that." He'd placed his free hand over where hers rested in the crook of his elbow, squeezed his fingers gently over hers now.

"No," Beth said. "Not until I finish my degree at least."

Remy looked absolutely delighted. "You are studying? What, and where?"

"Nursing," she admitted, "at Columbia. Hence the 'needing a job'. Fees are *not* cheap."

He looked thoughtful and nodded his head. "*Oui, je comprends...* well, we do not know each other well enough yet for me to offer my assistance, but Beth, please know that when you are more comfortable with me, I am quite wealthy. More than wealthy enough for you not to have to work your fingers to the bone while you finish your studies, if that is what you wish."

He'd phrased that about as tactfully as was possible, and Beth found it impossible to be offended. Not when she was exhausted from studying and working and spying for the Avengers all at the same time, and still only just making enough money to keep up with her rent and tuition. It was a good thing that she could eat for free at the cafe, anyway.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "I'll keep that in mind."

Remy squeezed lightly on her fingers again before taking that hand off and dropping it back to his side, looking ahead as they came to the end of the block.

"How long can you walk with me, *chère*?"

"I should get back," she admitted guiltily. "It's pretty busy today."

"Let us walk around the block, then, and perhaps I shall give you my phone number and you can call me when you feel ready? Though I hope you will not wait too long."

He was being quite ridiculously gallant, and it made Beth feel guilty for suspecting that he might be a bad guy. *Though I'm sure that plenty of criminals act like perfect angels as far as their loved ones are concerned...*

A slight shadow dressed all in black detached from a service entrance as they passed, and a cool, steady voice said "Let go of her, now."

Beth startled, and Remy's free hand twitched. A playing card, glowing around the edges with violet light, appeared in his hand.

"Romanoff," he said evenly, "whatever beef you may have with me, she's an innocent. I know you don't care for collateral damage these days, so just let her walk away."

"*LeBeau*?" Natasha gasped, lowering her guns, her expression completely astonished. "What are *you* doing with Beth?"

Remy tilted his head, looking rather startled. "You... *aren't* after me?"

"I came after you because I thought you were kidnapping her! We got a message about suspicious activity at the cafe and two minutes later, her phone signal went heading off, hours before she was due to leave work." Natasha looked at Beth, who still had her hand on Remy's arm. "I take it he *doesn't* have you at gunpoint?"

"No!" Beth shook her head vehemently. "He's my soulmate."

"Oh, you *poor* thing," a voice said above them, and they both looked up to see Clint crouched on an overhang, watching them, his bow in hand. "Remy," he nodded with a grin.

"You two have taken your sweet time noticing me, I thought you were getting slack. I've been hanging around the Tower for nearly a week now," Remy grinned back, the playing card in his hand disappearing back up his sleeve. Beth couldn't help but wonder exactly what he'd planned to do with it, and what the *hell* that violet light had been.

"We've been out of town," Natasha said, her tone slightly defensive, as she slipped her guns back into their thigh holsters.

"Then whoever you've got watching your security is *pathétique*, it takes a waitress on your payroll to tip you off. No offense, *chère*," he put his hand back over Beth's and squeezed lightly again.

"None taken," she said, watching with fascination as Natasha nodded.

"I'll look into it. But then, you know, *normal* people might have just walked into Reception and given their name." Natasha's tone was sugary sweet.

Clint chuckled, jumping agilely down from the overhang to land in front of them. "More fun to check out our security and case the place, isn't it, Remy?"

"I prefer to think of it as a strategic assessment," Remy said suavely, "particularly since I

intended to point out the holes in your perimeter. Most of them, anyway.”

“Naturally.” Clint gave him a wry grin, then looked at Beth, whose head was swivelling back and forth like a spectator at a tennis match as they bantered, her blue eyes very wide. “He’s really, definitely your soulmate, Beth?”

“Yes,” she said in a small voice. “I... feel like I should apologise for them ambushing us, I tipped them off about you...” she tipped her face up to look at Remy.

“*Non, chère!*” he said at once. “Do not ever apologise to me for doing your job, and for being observant. You were quite right to report me as suspicious. I was, after all, behaving suspiciously. You weren’t to know it was deliberate.”

Remy’s smile down at her was warmly approving, and Beth found herself basking in it. From the corner of her eye she caught Clint watching her with a sardonic grin, and tried to snap herself out of it. It wasn’t easy. Remy’s charm was lethal.

“Come on up to the Tower, then,” Natasha said. “You too, Beth, of course.”

“I have to finish my shift,” she said quickly. “We’re busy today, and shorthanded. I should be getting back now, actually, you go on, Remy...”

“*Non,*” he said firmly, “I shall walk you back, and have another coffee, and wait for you to finish. Now that I have found you, I am reluctant to take my eyes off you, *chère.*”

“Oooh, *slick,*” Clint said in an undertone to Natasha, who just shook her head at him.

“You should be taking notes, you idiot. All right, Remy, Beth, we’ll see you a bit later.”

Neither of them gave any sign of having heard her, just gazing deep into each other’s eyes. Shaking her head, Natasha tugged Clint away. She paused at the street corner to look back and smiled as she saw Remy and Beth entwined in a passionate embrace.

“I suspect the first thing we’ll have to do is find that pair a room!” Clint snickered.

## **\*Chapter 46\*: We’ll Take Care Of Each Other (Frank Castle/Dai...**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/PunishQuake\\_zps0q7bumcw.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20/PunishQuake_zps0q7bumcw.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

### *St Agnes’ Orphanage*

“Full circle,” Daisy whispered to herself, staring at the aged bronze plaque set into the wall. This was where the SHIELD agents who’d saved her life had brought her, where they’d hidden her, setting up a protocol to ensure she never stayed in one place too long. Where the nuns had given her the most innocuous name they could imagine. Who, after all, would think that a girl named Mary-Sue really could be the Special One?

She chuckled at her own whimsy, staring at the plaque still. The building wasn’t even an orphanage any more; a second plaque above the old one read *Former Site Of*. At some point in the last decade it had been converted into trendy apartments, like so many old buildings in this part of Hell’s Kitchen.

Looking around, there was very little Daisy recognised. Almost every building had been rebuilt or ‘done up’, the whole street gentrified. Hell’s Kitchen had taken a hell of a beating in the Battle of Manhattan, and the real estate was too valuable not to be reclaimed, she supposed. Only the church she’d passed, a little ways back up the street, was familiar.

With a sigh, she carried on walking. St Agnes’ might be gone, but it wasn’t like she’d

wanted to reminisce, anyway. Passing a deli, she paused as her stomach growled, and decided to treat herself to a Reuben sandwich. There was a tiny park another block further on with a small bench; she sat down to eat there.

She'd barely taken a bite when she got a visitor; a big, scarred pit bull who came bounding up and put his paws on the bench beside her, eyeing her sandwich with extreme interest, though he had manners enough not to snatch.

Daisy had to laugh. "Hello there."

The dog *woofed* gently at her. Despite his scars, she was quite sure he wasn't a fighting dog, reached out without hesitation to pet his bullet head, scratch behind his ears.

"Hey, don't touch my dog, you dumbass!" a deep voice rumbled behind her, and she looked up to see a tall, dark-haired man with a battered, lived-in face. Wearing a multi-pocketed black jacket with cargo pants and combat boots, the way he moved set Daisy's internal *Danger, Will Robinson!* radar pinging at once.

Despite that, she gave him a smile. "I'm not a dumbass - I hope. With a soulmark like mine, I pat a lot of strange dogs, you see."

Tall, Dark and Rugged froze mid-stride. His dog took the opportunity to snatch a slice of corned beef from her neglected sandwich, not that Daisy noticed or cared. In fact, she laid the sandwich down on the bench and stood up.

"My name," she said, "is Daisy Johnson. And I've been befriending strange dogs all my life, waiting for someone to call me a dumbass."

"I - I've been calling a lot of people dumbasses for patting my dog," he admitted, though his eyes were wary as she approached slowly. "Fortunately, he's really friendly."

"He's a sweetheart," Daisy looked around just in time to see the dog gulp down the last of her sandwich. "Oh. Well. A bit of a *thieving* sweetheart, though. And with the sauerkraut in that, he might not smell too good, a bit later..."

A rather rusty-sounding laugh made her look back at her soulmate. The way he looked when he laughed made her mentally revise his description from *Tall Dark and Rugged* to *Tall Dark and Ruggedly Handsome*.

"Daisy, did you say?" He took a step closer and offered a large, capable hand. "I'm Frank."

She took his hand, smiling up at him. He was probably around six foot, but the breadth of his shoulders made him look bigger. There was power in his grip, though he certainly wasn't crushing her hand, was holding it carefully. Looking up into his craggy face, she reckoned he was probably ten years older than she was, though it could be more. He'd been through the wringer, she could see that much. His eyes were a thousand years old in pain.

Daisy had seen eyes like that too many times before. "It's lovely to meet you, Frank," she said pleasantly, though, not wanting to spook him by being pushy. *I'd probably be spooked if he got pushy too*, she thought ruefully.

"Since Buddy ate your lunch," Frank rescued the empty sandwich wrapper from his dog's jaws, "can I buy you another sandwich?"

She could deal with that. "Sure," she gestured to the deli she'd just walked from. "It was a good sandwich, too, you dreadful animal," she scolded Buddy, who happily lolled his tongue out at her. "You utter softy," Daisy could resist scratching behind his ears again. Buddy promptly rolled over and showed her his belly, begging for a tummy rub which she was only too happy to provide.

“Since it looks as though you’ve already stolen my dog’s affections, I’m probably already doomed,” Frank said wryly, looking down at his soulmate as she played with his fool of a dog.

“Oh, I’m pretty sure he knows who his master is,” Daisy chuckled as Buddy bounced back to his feet and went to lick at Frank’s hand. “Where did you get him? And how did he get those terrible scars?” She fell into step beside Frank as he started walking towards the deli, laughing as Buddy promptly nosed his way in to walk in between them.

“I took him off some Irish assholes who were pit fighting him,” Frank said simply.

Daisy’s lip curled in a snarl. “*Good*,” she said vehemently. With a sideways glance at Frank, she asked tentatively “And the Irish assholes, they just let you take him, did they?”

“They weren’t really in any position to argue the point,” Frank replied with a tight little smile.

“Good,” Daisy said again, simply. Frank glanced across at her. She smiled at him.

Buddy was quite content to sit patiently outside the deli while they went in and ordered. Frank ordered some slices of corned beef for him anyway, making Daisy chuckle.

“No wonder he’s devoted to you!”

Frank smiled sheepishly. “I probably spoil him, but... he’s a good dog. Smart. Doesn’t deserve the shitty start he had in life.”

“Sounds like quite a few people I know,” Daisy said.

“You?” Frank asked perceptively.

“It’s a long story.”

“I got time. When you’re ready.”

They walked back to the bench and sat down, unwrapping their sandwiches. Frank put Buddy’s meat down and the dog happily settled in under the bench with it.

“Been a long time since I had a good Reuben sandwich,” Daisy said with a sigh after taking her first big bite and savouring it.

“Spoken like a New Yorker.” Frank didn’t look at her as he made the remark.

“I was, once, but... I’m not really from anywhere, now.” She took another bite, and then told him about growing up bouncing between St Agnes and a bunch of foster homes. In return, he told her about his time in the Marines, his years overseas. And, hesitantly, about his wife and children, but in the past tense, in a tone that told her what had happened.

“I’m so sorry,” Daisy said simply.

“I was nineteen when you were born,” he admitted. “I’d known Maria all my life; loved her as long. I couldn’t imagine ever feeling about anyone else the same way. I married her before I went to basic training with the Marines; we were just kids. My words showed up when I was deployed overseas in Iraq. I didn’t know how to tell her, when I got home, but when she saw them, she just said that it would be a long time before you showed up and she might have gotten sick of me by then.”

The pain was no longer raw in him, Daisy could tell, though thinking of his wife obviously still hurt.

“She must have been quite a woman,” she offered gently.

“She was.” Frank smiled at her, then, his eyes no longer far away with memories. “I can almost hear her now, telling me that I’m being an ass for talkin’ about her to my soulmate. I don’t mean to put you up against some sainted dead woman, Daisy. Maria sure wasn’t no saint.”

That made Daisy smile, reach out to touch his hand impulsively. “I know, Frank. It’s okay. We’ve all lost people. There was a guy, for me - a friend who became something more. He

ended up sacrificing himself to save me - to save everyone, actually. I just - I've seen too many people die, lost too many I cared about. I left the rest of my team because I seem to bring ruin and destruction with me wherever I go - I'm sitting here now thinking that I should walk away from you because I'll bring it to you, too."

"I've already seen and suffered more ruin and destruction than any man should have to in five lifetimes," Frank told her, his voice low and rough. "That sure as hell didn't make me back down from what needed to be done. If whoever you're runnin' from comes after you, then I'll make them wish they were never born."

That made Daisy smile, despite the tears threatening to escape her eyes. "I can take care of myself, Frank. It's you I'm worried about."

"Did you really think the Fates would send you a soulmate who wasn't your match?" he raised a black eyebrow cynically. "There's a reason they gave you to me, and me to you, and I gotta think that it's because I'm supposed to keep you out of that trouble that you think is following you around."

*Woof!* Buddy agreed, suddenly popping out from beneath the bench and making Daisy jump. Laughing, she patted his head.

"I'm sure you'll help, Buddy. We can all take care of each other, huh?"

"Sounds like a plan to me," Frank agreed, and when Daisy looked back up at him, he smiled at her and reached to pat Buddy's head too, so that their fingers entwined in the dog's fur.

### **\*Chapter 47\*: Quake And The Devil (Matt Murdock/Daisy Johnson...**

SPECIAL\_IMAGE-[http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine\\_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20DevilQuake\\_zpsxsjmalkj.jpg](http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%20DevilQuake_zpsxsjmalkj.jpg)-REPLACE\_ME

She wasn't sure what it was that had drawn her back to New York, to Hell's Kitchen, until she found herself standing in front of St. Joseph's.

St. Agnes' orphanage wasn't a place she wanted to revisit, ever, but the church... while she'd never fully bought into its teachings, St. Joseph's had been a sanctuary for her in more ways than one. Daisy took a hesitant step forward, intending to go inside, when she saw two men come out and walk down the steps. One of them was using a white cane to guide his footing; there was something oddly familiar about him, though she didn't think she'd ever seen him before. The other was almost as dear to her as Phil Coulson had become, and she forgot all about the blind man in the rush of emotion that overwhelmed her.

"Father Lantom?" she said hesitantly, when he turned back in her direction, and he stared at her for a moment before recognition brightened his eyes.

"Mary Sue!"

She didn't even care about the hated name, just ran into his open arms and enjoyed the warm embrace. "It's so good to see you, Father!"

"Come inside, my child. I'll put the kettle on and make tea."

Daisy didn't notice that the blind man had stopped walking away, his head turned back towards them.

"I know that voice," Matt murmured quietly to himself, wracking his memory. It had been a long time since he'd heard it, and it had been higher then, more girlish. He almost took a

step back, but he could hear Father Lantom and the girl he'd called Mary Sue talking in intimately friendly tones, and he didn't want to interrupt the reunion.

*Mary Sue Poots*, he remembered suddenly, as he turned and started walking home. A quiet little thing a few years his junior, eyes too big for her face - he'd touched her once, to explore her delicate features. She'd been one of the few people at St. Agnes' that he'd actually been close to, despite the age gap. For a moment he thought about turning back, going to see her; but if she was back in New York - he'd already proven that his friends got hurt just for being his friends. Sighing, Matt walked onwards, alone.

It was on a roof late that night when he heard the voice again, and he was immediately sprinting over the rooftops, desperate to get to her, because the man she was speaking to had a voice Matt knew. He was linked to a nasty human trafficking ring Matt had been working on taking down for a while.

"So you've been away from Hell's Kitchen a while, huh?" the man said.

"Not long enough," Daisy said cynically, "to lose the skill of recognising sleazebags when I see them."

"Hey, that ain't a nice thing to say!"

"You're not a nice person."

He tried to grab her and Daisy blocked the move, swept his legs out from under him and put a foot on his throat. Before she could even say anything, though, a dark red shadow dropped down beside her, pushed her aside and grabbed the asshole up, shaking him hard, pinning him against a wall.

"You stay the fuck away from her," a deep voice growled. "She's under my protection."

She didn't feel like being under anyone's protection, and she didn't want to draw attention to herself, so she took to her heels.

It was only once she got two full blocks away that Daisy realised that the shadow in red had to be the man the press called the Devil of Hell's Kitchen. She'd read plenty about him, even checked out the files SHIELD had on him one time, but she hadn't expected to encounter him; not when she only planned to be here a short time, and she had no intention of using her powers at all.

*Why on earth would he put her under his protection, though?* That made no sense at all. Unless SHIELD had come looking here already, wondering if she'd go back to St. Agnes, somehow made contact with him and asked him to look out for her...

She abruptly reversed course. If that was the case, she needed to know *now*. She'd planned to go see Father Lantom again tomorrow, but she didn't want to bring SHIELD down on him.

Both Daredevil and the sleazebag were gone when she got back to the spot where she'd left them. Looking around and muttering under her breath, she scowled when she heard angry voices approaching the mouth of the dead-end alley.

*Vertical exit it is...*

Matt barely suppressed an outright scream of shock when the girl *flew* up onto the roof and damn near landed on top of him.

*OK, that I really didn't expect...*

"Seems we both keep running into each other today," he said.

She turned to him, hands up and ready, probably to send him flying off the roof. "Have we met?" she asked, more than a thread of curiosity in her voice.

"Before today? Yes, but you were only about twelve the last time, I think. Mary Sue Poots."

He detected her grimace. "I don't go by that name anymore."

"That's good, because I don't think it suits you." He smiled a little bit. "It's not a very superheroic kind of name."

Matt sensed her smile, heard the laugh in her voice as she said "Maybe I should start using it again, actually. Nobody would ever dream that Mary Sue Poots could possibly be Quake."

She'd dropped her hands, no longer stood in a defensive stance.

"Just like nobody thinks the Devil of Hell's Kitchen could possibly be blind," he offered in return, and heard her sharply indrawn breath as she put the clues together.

"You're Matthew Murdock!"

"Pleased to make your acquaintance again... Quake." He offered his hand, and after a moment, she took it, shook it with a firm, steady grip.

"You can call me Daisy." She hesitated only a moment longer before saying "It's my real name, but... I'm kinda incognito right now."

"Curiously, I'm not in the least surprised." He grinned at her. "Need a place to lay low?"

"That would be pretty useful," she admitted. "But... I heard you became a lawyer."

"And you're worried I'll turn you in? I also became a vigilante," Matt gestured down at his outfit. "As long as I don't find you misusing those powers, we're all good."

"Thanks, then," she said with a nod, and, at his gesture, fell into step with him across the rooftop. "Can I ask you an odd question?"

"How do I do this when I'm blind?"

"... You're actually not the first man I've met who saw with senses other than his eyes," Daisy said, remembering Gordon. "No, that wasn't the odd question. About eighteen months ago, I... underwent a - a *change*, and afterwards, there was a soulmark on my back."

Matt froze mid-stride. "About eighteen months ago, I got a burning sensation on my arm," he said. "When I got to a friend, to look, he told me it was a soulmark that said 'Have we met?' I assumed I wouldn't meet my soulmate for a good many years. If I survive that long."

"Well," she shrugged a little, realised he might not be able to sense that and reached tentatively for his hand instead. "I'm sorry that I'm not going to be the nubile eighteen-year-old you'll meet when you're nearly fifty."

That made Matt snort with laughter. "I'm glad you're not. Really."

"Maybe we can work on making it to fifty, together?" Daisy suggested tentatively. "It strikes me that we could be a pretty good team."

"Quake and the Devil?"

"Sounds kind of like the title of a Black Sabbath track," Daisy answered with a laugh, "but I do like the sound of it."

"Sounds like it could be our song," Matt smiled, his fingers tightening around hers as he led her onwards across the rooftops of Hell's Kitchen.

### **\*Chapter 48\*: The Trickster's Witch (Loki/Wanda)**

“Odin is inviting us to Asgard?” Steve stared at Thor in disbelief. “Why?”

Thor gave him a Look, which made Steve feel about two inches tall. “Midgard’s defenders must be united,” Thor said at last. “Divided and cut off from your resources, you are vulnerable. A peace must be established as soon as possible, so that you may resume your duties. Odin will broker the peace, and there can be no neutral ground on Midgard, so to Asgard you must come.”

Steve shared a look with T’Challa, standing silently to one side. The young king nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Stark has agreed?” Steve checked.

“Indeed. He and Vision will attend. Colonel Rhodes has elected not to, since his injuries still pain him and he would suffer in Asgard’s slightly heavier gravity, but he has assured me that he too desires the Avengers to be reunified.”

“We don’t know where Natasha is,” Steve said in a questioning tone. Thor gave him another Look and he shut up.

“Heimdall the Guardian sees all,” was all Thor said.

“Looks like we’re gonna get to see Asgard,” Sam murmured to Wanda, as they stood in the background watching the conversation.

She nodded silently, though privately she doubted they would even let her go. Steve had seemed more determined than ever to wrap her up in cotton wool since the rescue from the Raft, and she was thoroughly tired of it.

Thor, however, had other ideas, and he made it quite clear that not only were they all invited, Odin would take it as a personal insult if they *didn’t* come. He insisted that Bucky be brought out of cryo, too, saying that Asgard’s mind-healers were among the best in the known universe. Wanda was silent, though resentment seethed inside her again; she was quite certain that *she* could have helped Bucky, but Steve hadn’t even allowed her to make the offer to him.

*I cannot control their fear; only my own,* she recited to herself silently. *And I am not afraid.* The idea of seeing Asgard was quite exciting, actually. She’d had quite a few long conversations with Thor before he departed, and he’d told her quite a lot about his home. She was looking forward to the trip.

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Asgard proved to be just as spectacular as Thor had described; Wanda gazed, lips parted with awe, along the shimmering bridge from the Bifrost chamber as the other readied around her. Horses were brought for them, which proved entertaining; she knew how to ride, but it seemed that not all of the others did. Clint, T’Challa, Bucky and (a little surprisingly) Sam, looked quite comfortable in saddles, but Scott and Steve both looked nervous and had to be led by two of Thor’s smiling friends who were there to greet them, since Thor was going straight back to Earth to collect Tony and Vision.

Even the luxury of Stark Tower did not compare to Asgard’s palace, Wanda thought, looking around the magnificent suite she’d been given, drifting her fingers gently over the edge of the dresser. The wood, a deep brown-red, was highly polished and unmarred, but everything about it screamed of incredible age. *This dresser was in this room when human were building pyramids in the Egyptian desert,* she thought with a shake of her head. *What tales it could tell, if only it could speak...*

A polite knock on the door had her turning to see the Lady Sif standing in the open doorway.

"The All-Father will see you now, Lady Wanda," she said politely.

"Thank you," Wanda dipped her head a little nervously. "But please, just call me Wanda. There's not a drop of noble blood in me."

Sif's smile was mysterious. "Titles may be earned as well as inherited, my lady."

She wasn't quite sure what to say to that, so she just followed the tall warrior woman as Sif led her through wide, airy passages until finally they reached Asgard's throne room.

Wanda saw, with some relief, that they weren't being called in to face Odin alone. The others were entering the room from different doorways, led by other Asgardians. Bucky wasn't there, but she had already known he wouldn't be. He would be in the Halls of Healing, trusting Steve to look after his interests.

Looking around, Wanda spied Clint and hurriedly made her way to his side; he offered her a distracted smile, but he was looking at Natasha, who'd just walked into the room from the other side.

Wanda sighed internally; there was too much to be said between those two for her to have any of Clint's attention right now. She could feel Vision looking at her, but she really didn't want to speak to him. Just like Tony, he viewed her as a dangerous child who needed to be locked up for her own protection. Or perhaps the protection of others. She didn't care any more which. At least she could trust Steve not to agree to anything like *that*.

The Asgardians were all leaving; Wanda looked around the room to avoid making eye contact with anyone she didn't want to right now, saw that a large throne had been set in the centre of the room, a group of comfortable-looking chairs in front of it in a semi-circle. Thor moved to stand by the throne and spoke, his deep voice cutting through the quiet chatter of the gathered Avengers.

"The All-Father approaches."

Wanda wasn't quite sure what she should do, as a white-haired man almost as tall as Thor, clad in long, ornately embroidered robes entered the room. From the corner of her eye she spied Sam executing a respectful bow, hastily mimicked him; only a moment later wondering if she should have curtsied instead. To do both would look idiotic, though, so she stood still, head ducked slightly, watching from under her lashes as Odin moved to stand before the throne. He was carrying a long black spear in one hand - Gungnir, as she recalled - and a raven was riding his shoulder. She wondered if it was Huginn or Muninn, even as Odin's single blue eye swept over her like a searchlight.

"Be seated," Odin's voice was low, rasping, and unmistakably a command rather than an invitation. Even T'Challa jumped and hurried to take a seat.

Wanda was startled, then, to see Nick Fury enter the room and take a seat to Odin's left. Steve and Tony both looked extremely guilty as Fury fixed them each in turn with a cyclopean glare every bit as terrifying as Odin's, and it was Fury who spoke first, not even bothering to moderate his language in deference to their location.

"What the *fuck* did you *stupid* motherfuckers think you were going to achieve with this reckless motherfucking bullshit?"

Scott, who'd dropped into the seat beside Wanda - Clint was on her other side - covered his mouth to suppress a snort of laughter.

Wanda suddenly had the feeling that everything was, in fact, going to work out perfectly

all right. Sitting back in her chair, she listened as Fury tore Steve and Tony each a new one with words wielded like precise whips, until both were cringing in their chairs, red-faced and silent.

Fury seemed to know T'Challa too, because he turned on him next, with a few sharp words about letting his emotions rule his actions. The king of Wakanda took it stoically, though Wanda saw his jaw muscles clench.

When Fury turned to Natasha, Wanda realised that each of them in turn was about to get a tongue-lashing. She tensed in anticipation, everything heightening until Fury turned at last to her.

"And you, Miss Maximoff," he said, "well done."

Wanda blinked in complete astonishment. "*What?*"

"I don't see what you could have done any differently. You were never even offered the chance to sign the Accords because from the beginning, Secretary Ross treated you as nothing more than a dangerous weapon to be controlled and used as he directed. There is nothing wrong with standing up for your own independence and freedom of speech and action, Miss Maximoff. I could wish that you hadn't felt the need to participate in the fighting, but at the end of the day, your cause was just, and you suffered for it. You did well." Fury nodded to her and turned his gaze on Scott, leaving an astonished Wanda to slump into her chair, wondering what on earth had just happened.

Feeling eyes on her, she looked up at last, feeling more prepared to face Vision now that *someone* had expressed approval of her actions. It wasn't Vision who was looking at her, though; she swept her eyes around the loose circle until she found, with surprise, Odin's single blue eye resting thoughtfully upon her.

She offered an uncertain smile; to her surprise a very small smile curved the corners of his lips up in return and he inclined his head very slightly to her. Curious about why he had called this 'conference' but seemed willing to let Fury do all the talking - or reprimanding, as seemed to be the case - Wanda couldn't quite resist reaching out to him with her mind.

Wanda had touched Thor's mind before, was aware of the differences between Asgardian and human. She was quite prepared for the sensation of great age, though it wasn't so great as she'd expected. The thick layer of - concealment? - on the outer surface of his mind, though, was unexpected. Curiously, she probed, trying to find a way in, trying to see what was hidden beneath.

Clint, perhaps unsurprisingly, was the first one to react when Wanda's chair toppled over backwards as she startled to her feet, screaming "*Loki!*" at the top of her lungs. Required to divest himself of all physical weapons before entering the throne room, he still came up with two poison darts that had been concealed within his belt buckle, looking around wildly.

"Where?" he yelled.

She didn't know. He had to be concealed somewhere in the throne room; she had to have touched his mind instead of Odin's. Panicking, frightened, she stumbled backwards; Steve's strong hands on her shoulders steadied her.

"My brother is dead, Lady Wanda," Thor's words fell into the stunned silence like a stone into a pond, ripples spreading out around it. "Perhaps you have sensed some ghost of his presence." The evident pain in his words and the agony, the loss she saw on Odin's face made her look down at the floor, shamed, doubting herself.

Odin turned and swept out of the room, Thor following on his heels, and Clint slowly put away his darts before coming over to Wanda and touching her arm.

"Are you alright, honey?" His grey eyes were full of concern, and something else, a

long-buried terror that Wanda realised she had brought to the surface with her careless action.

"I'm sorry," she choked, and found herself enveloped in a hug.

"It's okay. It's okay. I can imagine that this place is pretty overwhelming to someone sensitive to emotions, especially considering the reaming we all just got."

"I'm sorry if that distressed you, Miss Maximoff," Fury was bearing down on them, too. "Perhaps you'd like a break?"

Wanda nodded uncertainly, confused. She was so *sure* she'd felt Loki's mind; it could be no-one else. Yet, there were two powerful, alien beings who'd loved him deeply in the room; possibly one or both of them might have been thinking of their fallen kinsman, projecting him somehow?

"I think I need some fresh air," she mumbled into Clint's shoulder. She'd suffered from claustrophobia ever since the Raft, which he well knew.

"Let's get you outside." Taking her hand, Clint led her to a door, asked the warrior leaning against the wall just outside it the quickest way outside. They were soon led to a beautiful garden, stunning foliage and softly tinkling fountains creating a peaceful atmosphere. "Huh, this is nice. Laura would love this," Clint looked around as he led Wanda over to sit on a nearby bench. "Can I get you anything, hon? Drink of water?"

"No, I'm good," she shook her head, beginning to feel like a dreadful bother. "I'm all right, really, Clint. I'll just sit here for a while and then ask someone to guide me back to my room. I don't think I really need to be in there, anyway. I trust you and Steve not to agree to anyone locking me up for my own good." She gave him a shaky little smile. "But you should be in there. You and Scott, you're the only ones with a family. That's important."

Clint looked at her for a moment before leaning in to kiss her forehead. "You're important too, Wanda. Nobody's going to agree to anything, yet. We're just gonna talk about a way forward. If you don't want to be in there, nobody's gonna make you, but you do deserve a voice in this."

"Later," she said, patting his hand lightly. "All that guilt tripping going on while Fury was ripping everybody a new one made my head hurt."

"You and me both, and I can't read minds!" Clint joked, to make her smile. He rose to his feet. "All right. You do what you have to do. I'll fill you in later."

Wanda smiled at his back as he headed off, before sitting back and breathing deeply, basking in the sunlit garden, trying to relax. Thoughts of that terrifyingly powerful, complex mind full of concealment and danger she'd brushed up against earlier kept intruding, though, until her eyes snapped open as she suddenly became aware that she was no longer alone.

Thor and Odin stood looking down at her.

"I really didn't expect you to figure it out so soon," Thor said, "but we have to ask you to remain silent, Wanda."

She came to her feet with the speed of a striking snake, her right hand snapping out, a ball of red power striking Thor in the chest and sending him flying.

"Silent? You ask me to be *silent*, when Loki is masquerading as Odin? You know what he did to Clint!" Wanda brought both hands to bear on Loki/Odin, who was regarding her with fascination. "You'll pay for that," she threatened, "I'm going to unmask you!"

"I have already paid for that with pain and suffering greater than you can ever imagine, and I cannot let you spoil our plans," his own hands came up, glowing green. Wanda was faster, though, experienced in fighting with her power over the last couple of years, and she caught him

by surprise, simultaneous shots of red light sending him tumbling over backwards with a startled cry.

Wanda had no intention of giving up her advantage. She leaped after him, crouched over his fallen form and clamped her hands to either side of his head, her eyes glowing red as well as her hands. She would end this charade *now*.

Odin/Loki smiled.

And Wanda fell headfirst into the trap he'd carefully constructed for her, a trap with no way out.

His mind was a hall of mirrors, walls, floor, ceiling. Her power splashed harmlessly off the reflections when she tried to shatter the mirrors, to break a way through. Scared, she began to run, looking for a way out, some chink in the glass, but it was an endless, shifting maze. Walls became doors became walls again, and always, she saw nothing but herself.

"What have we here?" Tendrils of green power crept into her from everywhere and nowhere, curling into every orifice, and suddenly she was facing Him, the tall, black-haired, green-eyed being she'd seen in images from the Battle of New York.

Loki.

He smiled down at her curiously, tilting his head. "So *you* are what the Mindstone made when left to its own devices."

It was all in her own mind, she knew. Or perhaps his. Still, he almost radiated power, a different kind to hers, but power nonetheless, ancient and compelling. She couldn't look away, couldn't move as he strolled around her in a slow circle; a rabbit trapped by the hypnotic stare of the snake.

"Why do you waste your time with these foolish mortals?" Loki asked suddenly, moving back around in front of her. "Your mind encompasses more than they will ever even begin to comprehend. They fear you; they will always fear that which they do not understand. Even the one you call Vision. He cares for you, but now he knows that your power is greater than his own, even he is made small and petty by his fear."

"I cannot control their fear," Wanda repeated the mantra she had taken to herself. "Only my own."

Loki smiled. "*Can* you control your own fear, little witch? Can you really?" A sweep of his hand, and the hall of mirrors changed, became something else. Something Wanda recognised. The long corridor of many doors that she remembered only too well.

The orphanage.

"What do you hide behind your secret doors, little witch?" Turning, Loki opened the closest door, and Wanda saw her brother's face, grey in death.

She screamed.

"Ah." To her surprise, Loki closed the door, casting her a look of pity. "The loss of those we love makes cowards of us all."

"Not him. Don't - not him." She shook violently, the shock of what had been behind that door almost overwhelming.

"Hush, little witch. I will not use that against you. I would not be so cruel."

Wanda sobbed with relief.

"Do not mistake me; I *am* cruel. But I am not a monster. I *will* find something to use against you, because you have shown me that you are powerful, and I must have a weapon with which to vanquish you - but your brother's death is a step too far, even for me."

She screamed again, despairingly, as he moved away, as he opened some of the doors she'd worked so hard to close, though strangely enough, he kept his body between her and what was behind the doors, so that she could not see what was there. Some doors he closed after a single glance; one he threw wide open, smiling at what he found within.

"Oh, little witch. What a secret you've been hiding from your oh-so-upright, moral comrades. But I know you now, I know your secret heart, your truest, darkest desires."

She shivered as he turned and came closer, the dream-form of him trailing an icy-cold finger along the warmth of her throat.

"You dream of being made a woman," his voice whispering in her ear made her tremble uncontrollably. "No man has touched you intimately, have they? But yours are not dreams of silk sheets and rose petals; no, you dream of ropes and chains, of teeth meeting in your soft flesh, fingers pinching and twisting..."

Her clothes were gone, and they were back in the hall of mirrors. This time, though, there were chains hanging from the ceiling, cuffs dangling at their ends. She couldn't even fight as Loki took one of her hands in his, pulled it upwards and closed the cuff around her wrist.

"Such sweet dreams," Loki said almost tenderly as he snapped on the other cuff. "What a temptation you are, little witch. Tempting enough that I may have to continue this in the flesh..."

His teeth met in her throat and Wanda screamed, jerking awake.

"Wanda!" Steve, sitting by her bed, leaned over and took her hand in his. "Are you alright?" His face was the picture of concern.

Lifting her fingers to her neck where Loki had bitten her, she was startled to find no pain there, only the remembered ghost of it. "Loki," she whispered.

"Loki is *dead*, Wanda," Steve looked disapproving. "You upset both Thor and Odin shouting about him earlier, not to mention Clint. We are guests here, please try to remember that!"

"I'm not a child, Steve, and I'm telling you, Loki isn't dead!" She sounded petulant, Wanda realised despairingly, and she could tell from the look on Steve's face that he had no intention of changing his mind.

"You fainted in the gardens, Wanda. You're not well."

"Captain," a soft voice said, and a tall, slim woman with a complicated arrangement of golden braids around her serene face came out of the shadows on the far side of the room. "It grows late. Please, allow me to remain with Lady Wanda, and seek your own rest."

"I'm not tired," Steve said, but Wanda already knew he just didn't want to be there.

"Go," she said sulkily.

"Healer Eir will remain with you," Steve said, distinct relief in his tone. "I hope you feel better in the morning, Wanda."

She said nothing, too angry with his dismissive attitude to even wish him a good night as he left. The door closed behind him, and the tall blonde woman smiled down at Wanda before her features wavered and faded away, replaced by another face entirely.

Wanda opened her mouth to scream, but realised with despair that she was too late, as tendrils of green power curled into her mouth, gagging her to silence. She hadn't tried to move since she woke apart from opening her eyes and turning her head to look at Steve; understood now that she'd already been gently restrained, as a gesture from Loki swept the sheet covering her back and she looked down to find softly glowing green bonds encircling her body. She was still clothed, she realised with some relief.

“Such a pretty little witch,” Loki murmured softly. “Such foolish Midgardian men, not to recognise all that sensual potential, just waiting to be unleashed. What power will be yours, once you are truly awakened, Wanda!”

There was no fear in his tone, Wanda realised with some shock. Only - excitement? Enthusiasm? He was smiling down at her with something like awe in his expression.

“The Nine Realms will see your coming and tremble,” Loki said quietly. “Midgard will be revered as the world which produced so powerful a sorceress. None will dare to move against your home, Wanda, for fear of your reprisals; even if you never set foot there again.”

Was he lying? He was a god of lies, after all, but she could hear the ring of truth in his words, see it in his expression, as he took a seat on the edge of the bed, leaning over her.

“Will you destroy me, when you are fully come into your power?” Loki whispered curiously. “Will you hate me, for knowing what you truly are?”

Spellbound by the look in his eyes, Wanda somehow found herself shaking her head.

“No?” Loki looked a little startled. “Perhaps I will be your master, but also a slave to your slightest whim. Ah, Wanda, your eyes enchant me!”

She was just thinking the same thing about him, wondering if he was using some power of compulsion upon her, even though she could not feel any touch upon her mind. Staring up at him beseechingly, Wanda implored him with her eyes, not to do this, not to hurt her... even though her body was already quivering in anticipation of his touch. She couldn't stop thinking about it, thinking about the long, cruel length of his cold fingers, about how he would touch her. How he would *take* her.

“So lovely,” Loki whispered, still gazing into her eyes. His hand came up, hovered over her body for a moment, before he reached to the spot on her throat where he'd bitten her in the dream-vision. Wanda's skin tingled as his fingers approached, before a sudden white-hot pain shot through her, making her scream around the magical gag, her eyes flying wide open with shock and pain.

The gag, her bonds, vanished as though they had never been as Loki started back, his own eyes wide, his patrician features rippling strangely for a moment before settling.

“What just happened?” Wanda gasped out, her hands flying to her throat, to the white-hot agony now cooling to a strange, comforting warmth. In answer, Loki held up his hand, showing her a scarlet tracery of symbols trailing across two of his long fingers.

“Not merely a sorceress,” he said quietly, “but destined to be a queen. You are my soulmate, Wanda.”

“You're not a king,” pushing herself to sit up, she gathered her power, her hands beginning to glow red.

“No, only standing in for one while my father takes a much-needed rest. I could not allow you to expose me, Wanda. Not yet.”

She hesitated, watching him for a long moment, before letting the red glow about her hands wink out, reaching out to touch his hand, lying lax now on the bedspread. “Tell me, Loki. Maybe I could help.”

“You would do that?” He stared at her, amazed. “Even after knowing - what I would have done to you?”

Her lips quirked up in a little smile. “I think we both know that I'd have enjoyed it.”

“Which does not excuse...”

“No, it doesn't,” her fingers curled lightly around his. “We have both done things that

cannot be excused, Loki. If there is forgiveness for me, as I am assured that there is, then surely there can be some for you.”

His eyes were shadowed as he looked at her. “What did you see, when you looked into my mind?”

“A mirror,” Wanda replied quietly. “I saw myself, Loki. My own darkness.”

“We are the same, you and I, for all I have seen a dozen centuries and you barely two decades pass by,” Loki laid his other hand over hers. “You do not fear me,” he discovered, with dawning delight, as she smiled at him.

“No more than you fear me.”

“The Nine Realms will quake at your coming, my lady, but not I. Never I.” Lifting her fingers to his lips, he kissed her fingertips gently, his green eyes shining. “Queen of my heart.”

***Chapter 49*: Winter's Hostage (Bucky/Angie) - redirect to fi...**

For those of you who may be subscribed to this fic but not me as an author, this is just an advisory to let you know that a special Short was released today. I wrote it for the pod_together 2016 challenge and it has been podficed by the amazing Litra.

The fic is called *Winter's Hostage*, and you can find the link to the podfic at the beginning of it, if you would like to listen instead of read!

Working with Litra on this was an amazing experience and I am so happy with the result. If there are any other podficers who would like to pod one of the Shorts, or any other of my stories (For Want Of A Nail might be a *tad* long to take on, but if you want to, more power to you) please let me know!

(edit: put in the wrong link before! sorry! fixed now!)

***Chapter 50*: Captain America's Heard Of Me (Steve/Bucky/Pete...**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%202/WinterStarShield_zpstq9ng4dm.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Who the fuck are those two?” Peter slurred, waving his drink in the general direction of the two men who’d caught his eye. “They’re pretty but they don’t look like they belong here. Not enough capes.”

Thor grinned, knocking back another gulp of wine himself. “They are Midgardians like yourself, Star-Lord. Two of the Avengers, Captain America and the Winter Soldier.”

Peter blinked several times. “The blond one does look a lot like those old reels of Steve Rogers,” he said after a minute.

“He *is* Steve Rogers.”

“Steve Rogers died at the end of World War Two, Thor, every kid in America knows that!”

“Except that he did not.” Thor smiled a little smugly as Peter gaped. “And nor did his soulmate Sergeant Barnes perish in his tragic fall from the train.”

“No freakin’ way,” Peter breathed, turning back to stare at the two men, at the way they stood so close their shoulders were brushing. “Hot damn. I used to have *detailed* sexual fantasies

about those two in my teens.” He felt a sudden urge to do something he’d probably regret when he was sober. There was nothing remotely unusual about the impulse, so as usual, he acted on it. Knocking back the rest of his drink, he handed the empty cup to Thor and made a beeline for Steve and Bucky.

“Hello, who’s this character?” Steve said in an undertone to Bucky as they watched the apparently-human - or human enough to get drunk on Asgardian wine, anyway - man heading towards them in a line that was a lot more wavery than he probably thought it was.

“Dunno,” Bucky raked the tall redhead with a long glance. “He’s kinda hot, though. Like what that red leather coat does for his shoulders.”

Steve suppressed a snigger. “Behave.” He nudged Bucky.

Peter stopped right in front of the two men, blinked as he realised that he was actually a fraction taller than Captain America. Well. He hadn’t expected that. He smiled. “You two are really smokin’ hot,” he said in a rush of words, “and I’m really fuckin’ horny, so how about it? I’m always looking for meaningful one-night-stands.”

Steve’s jaw dropped, but Peter had expected that Captain America would be a bit more strait-laced than his partner. Barnes had been giving him a good stare on the way across the room, though, so it was Bucky at whom he looked, only for his head to whip back as Steve said;

“I think we might need a bit more than that. Like, the rest of your life.”

It was Peter’s jaw that dropped, this time. He gaped incredulously at Steve until Bucky chuckled and said;

“And I thought *I* was the slutty one in this soul-division!”

“Well,” Peter managed to recover his voice, if not his composure, “with words like that, I always felt compelled to out-slut *everyone*, y’know?” He had to wonder, despairingly, if they would think any less of him for it.

“It’s okay,” Steve’s hand landed on his, pulled him closer. “We’ve been waiting a long time for you to come and hit on us... what’s your name? I’m Steve and this is Bucky.”

“I know who you are! I’m Peter Quill. Star-Lord, but you won’t have heard of me...” since they were from Earth, they *definitely* wouldn’t have heard of him.

“Actually, we have,” Steve disagreed. “Thor told us about you. Said you were the first Midgardian he’d ever met, even before he came to Earth.”

“Captain America’s heard of me. My life is complete,” Peter blurted in complete amazement.

“Nah,” Bucky said, grinning. “Not yet, anyway.” The filthy look he gave Peter indicated exactly what needed to happen for that to be the case. Well. *Some* of the things. Some of them were only just beginning to occur to Peter’s drink-addled brain.

“Yeah,” Steve agreed, “you haven’t really lived until you’ve had Bucky’s cock in your mouth while I fuck your ass.”

Peter wasn’t sure he could get any more astonished. He gaped at Steve in complete, utter, wordless befuddlement. Who the hell would have thought *Captain America* could talk filth like that?

“I think I could definitely be on board with that plan,” he managed to stutter out eventually.

“Good, because in about ten minutes you’re gonna be the filling in a Stucky sandwich,” Bucky said with a dirty laugh, linking his arm through Peter’s.

“Thank you, any god that’s listening,” Peter said fervently, casting his eyes upwards as

his soulmates led him from the room and up a flight of stairs. “Oh, wow. I never thought I’d get to climb the *actual* stairway to heaven!”

***Chapter 51*: Off-Limits (Christine Everhart/Brock Rumlow/Jac...**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Cover%202/STRIKEReporter_zpslmljsq6h.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Heads up, Rollins,” Brock said in Jack’s earpiece, “incoming, your nine o’clock.”

“Of course there fuckin’ is,” Jack grumbled *sotto voce*, dutifully turning to look for the latest nosey parker who just couldn’t resist trying to get an up-close look at the alien wreckage. Sixty blocks of fucking Manhattan was cordoned off and would be for at least another week, the National Guard holding that boundary while scientists from SHIELD and various other alphabet soup agencies picked over the wreckage.

Rumlow, Rollins and the rest of STRIKE Team Alpha didn’t get the nice jobs, however, and they weren’t in Manhattan. They were on the other side of the East River in a recently gentrified neighborhood called Hunter’s Point, where one of the ‘space whales’ had crashed half-in, half-out of the river, sprawling messily onto a park. It was actually the most intact one of the lot, having crashed at the end of the battle when the nuke had exploded the outer-space mothership and the wormhole shut down. All the others had suffered severe battle damage from the Avengers and crashing into various buildings.

All of the above was why Fury had his most eager scientists crawling all over the damn thing, and why it was only STRIKE agents guarding the prize. The Director didn’t want to share this one. And it was STRIKE’s job to make sure that nobody got past their cordon.

Rumlow was up in one of the mobile command posts built around the shipwreck, spotting for the ground team. Jack turned to his left now, eyes searching for the target that his team leader and soulmate had just called his attention to.

“Oh, Christ,” Jack said aloud, “it’s another fuckin’ reporter.”

“If they’ve got a TV crew or cameras bring them in so we can confiscate the gear,” Rumlow ordered.

“Nothing visible,” Jack scanned the area, but he could only see the single woman walking steadily through the park towards him. That didn’t mean she wasn’t carrying a hidden camera, though. He’d have to bring her in anyway.

“How do you know it’s a reporter, then?”

“Because it’s Christine Everhart of HIH World News. She’s pretty easy to recognize.”

Jack heard the indrawn breath. “Holy shit,” Brock muttered then. “Alright. Stall her. I’ll be right down. We’ll have to bring her in.”

“Copy that.” She was close enough, now. Jack stepped up to face her.

She was smaller than she looked on-screen, but even more beautiful, her golden hair silky and shining in the summer sunshine. She smiled up at him guilelessly, her pink-painted lips parting to no doubt try and feed him some bullshit line to get her past the cordon. Pretty sight though she was, Jack had no intention of falling under her spell.

“Sorry miss, this area is off-limits,” he said politely but firmly.

The pink lips stayed parted, and her eyes flew very wide before she smiled. “Well, am I *ever* glad I found you,” she said.

“What?” Startled, Jack took a small step backwards.

“It’s all your fault I became an investigative reporter and made a habit of straying into off-limits areas in the first place!” Getting over her own shock, Christine smiled up at the tall soldier dressed all in black. She hadn’t missed the SHIELD logo on his shoulder, either. Stepping closer, she reached out to put a hand on his chest lightly, fingers grazing over the name ROLLINS stitched into the breast of his jacket. “I’m Christine...”

“I know who you are,” he said a little numbly. “I’m Jack, Jack Rollins...”

“What the fuck is this, a tea party?”

Rumlow had arrived.

Christine turned to face him, not dropping her hand from Jack’s chest, her smile widening as she looked Brock up and down. “And *you’re* the reason that my mother used to take a strap to my bottom every time I said a rude word.”

It took a hell of a lot to shock Brock Rumlow; he’d seen too much. Even so, his jaw dropped slightly, his eyes widening before he looked at Jack.

“She’s for real?”

“Said my words, too.”

And there was no way she could have found them out, no matter how good an investigative reporter she was, because neither of them had their words on file. Still, Brock said “Show me.”

“Suspicious, aren’t you, Agent Rumlow?” Christine dropped her hand from Jack’s chest, turned to face Brock. “I’m not going to show you yours. That strap I mentioned my mom using? Right over your words.” She tapped her hand on her shapely ass for emphasis. Both men drew in sharp breaths, pupils blowing wide with lust.

“Though I suppose I could show yours, Jack,” she turned the full wattage of her smile on Jack before slowly unbuttoning the bottom button of her blouse. And then a second. Then a third... they both stared, spellbound, as she parted the silk to reveal Jack’s slanted handwriting scrawled across the smooth skin of her flat stomach.

“So,” she figured she might as well try her luck, “gonna let me take a closer look?”

“I’m afraid not,” Rumlow really did sound regretful as he returned his gaze to her face. “We need to bring you in to make sure you’re not carrying a hidden camera or anything like that, but that’s just to the mobile command unit, over there,” he pointed away from the crash site.

“Ooh,” Christine cast her eyelashes down, peeked sexily up at him through them. “Will I need to be strip-searched?”

“Only if you misbehave,” Rumlow’s voice was low and rough. “Please. Do misbehave.”

She couldn’t help a little shudder. “I’ve always had a bit of a kink for men in uniform.”

Jack had gone quiet; she sensed him moving around behind her but didn’t pay any special attention until she felt one huge hand curl lightly around her wrist... a second before cold metal clicked shut.

“Handcuffs? Kinky,” Christine said, but she shivered again and didn’t resist as Jack took her other wrist and gently clicked the other cuff on, securing her hands behind her back. His warm breath flowed over her neck as he stood close, one big hand holding both her wrists just above the cuffs.

“Oh, sweetheart,” Jack said softly, “if you think that’s kinky, you ain’t seen nothin’ yet.”

Rumlow’s grin was heated, anticipatory, as Christine’s lips parted and she leaned back unconsciously into Jack’s touch. “Our shift finishes in forty minutes. Reckon it’ll take at least

that long to get you searched and processed - and then we should escort you home. City ain't safe for a lady alone when it's gettin' dark."

"Such gentlemen," Christine said a little breathlessly as he moved close, reached out to rebutton her blouse.

"I think you knew very well that your soulmates wouldn't be gentlemen," he said softly, eyes glittering at her. "And you wouldn't want it any other way."

***Chapter 52*: Brothers and Sisters (Nick Fury/Daisy Johnson)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%20/QuakeFury_zpskm7i17g2.jpg-REPLACE_ME

"That's right," Phil said patiently, "Leo Fitz, my chief engineer, and the Lady Sif."

"Soulmates." Nick actually seemed lost for words. "*Another* human and an Asgardian. I thought Foster and Thor were some strange anomaly. Didn't really think it was possible."

Phil looked at him oddly. "Only Thor and the Warriors Three have even visited Earth in the last thousand years, from what I understand. Why should it be so impossible?"

Fury heaved a deep sigh and leaned back in his chair, swinging back and forth, surveying Phil silently before saying "I suppose I know all your deep, dark secrets. I might as well trust you with one more of mine."

Phil blinked at him curiously. "I have the feeling that this is gonna be good."

"Fourteen hundred years ago, before Thor and Loki were born," Fury said, "there was an Asgardian who thought that he was more fit to be king than Odin All-Father. In his hubris, he sought to make a deal, the same deal that Odin made; an eye for wisdom." He lifted his hand to brush it almost absently over the eyepatch covering his left eye. "The warrior, however, wasn't as strong as Odin. He failed to gouge out his eye completely, and Mimir, the guardian of the Well at Yggdrasil's foot, refused the exchange. Odin, having learned of the warrior's ploy to dethrone him, arrived at the well and made his judgement. The warrior was banished, never again to set foot on Asgard. Thrown down the Bifrost, half-blinded and no wiser than he had been a day before, he raged for many years against his plight, wandering the primitive world to which he had been banished."

Electrified by the story, Phil just sat staring at Fury as the other man fell silent, slowly fingering his eyepatch. "What happened?" he asked finally.

"Oh," Fury's single black eye settled on him. "It took about a thousand years, but eventually he got over his fit of the sulks and realised that if he ever wanted to live among civilized people again, he'd better set about helping the race he'd been sent to live among achieve something. It had been a long time, but he remembered enough of his education to start talking to the smartest of the people he lived among. Nudging bright minds in the right direction. I - *he* didn't want to move directly, didn't want to take the spotlight. It would draw too much attention, you see. Even so, it was little more than twenty years before what the world would call the Industrial Revolution was well under way."

"You're talking about yourself, aren't you?" Phil asked quietly. He'd guessed almost from the start of the story, but the single *I* Fury had let slip confirmed it. Knowing that Elliott Randolph had managed to hide among Earth's population for hundreds of years unsuspected,

Phil wasn't really surprised that Fury had managed it too. "Well. This does explain how you managed to survive being blown up and shot by the Winter Soldier and were somehow well enough to walk into the Triskelion a day later. And then rescue Fitz and Simmons in the Gulf of Mexico and turn up at the Battle of Cybertek..."

"Should have known you'd be wondering about that," Fury said with a wry grin.

"I just assumed you had a stash of the Guest House drugs squirrelled away somewhere," Phil replied sardonically.

"Don't need them."

"So I see." Phil sat silent for a minute, collecting his thoughts. "So. You said you didn't believe Asgardians and humans could be soulmates, before Thor and Dr Foster, and now Fitz and Lady Sif. Why is that?"

"Before I left Asgard, Frigga came to me. She... I..." Fury looked down. "Part of the reason I wanted to dethrone Odin was that I wanted Frigga for myself," he confessed, shame-faced. "I was young and stupid and utterly ignorant, and the Queen took pity on me. She gave me a prophecy; that it was on Midgard where I would find my soulmate. I've been looking for *fourteen hundred years*, Coulson. In the end I assumed that she'd meant something other than what I assumed; that my soulmate would be Midgardian. I figured that she'd meant that I would eventually meet someone of another race here on Earth - when I heard that Sif was here again, I wondered..."

Phil's eyebrows flew up. "Damn, you must be really lonely," he said finally.

Fury looked up at him again. "I wouldn't go back to Asgard even if I could, because Earth is my home, now. But that doesn't stop me from wanting my soulmate. Fourteen hundred years is a long time to wait."

There was no denying that; it was a timeframe almost beyond Phil's comprehension. Instead of speaking, he took his good Scotch out of his desk and poured Fury a glass. There really wasn't much he could say that wouldn't be better expressed by the sharing of expensive liquor. Even if Fury's apparently-infinite alcohol tolerance was now explained.

"So," Phil said after they'd both knocked back a couple of fingers of whisky, "would you like to meet Sif and her friends?"

Fury shrugged. "Why the hell not. None of them were even born when I left Asgard, so it's not like they're going to recognise and out me. Obviously I'd rather this information wasn't shared around..."

Coulson's wry look made Fury smile slightly and nod. "There really is nobody I'd rather trust with my secrets than you, Phil." He downed another shot of the whisky before getting up, shrugging into his black leather coat. "Come on, then, let's get it over with."

May saw them come in first; stood to greet Fury with a welcoming smile. Jemma forgot herself so far as to hug him, which left Fury looking startled but not actually all that unhappy. He patted Jemma gingerly on the back.

"Glad to see you looking so well, Agent," he muttered.

"You too, sir," Jemma muttered into his shoulder before stepping back and smiling up at him. Suddenly becoming aware of Daisy at her side, Jemma said "Oh... I don't think you two have ever met, have you? Daisy, this is, uh, former Director Fury, Sir, this is Agent Daisy Johnson..."

"Also known as Quake, and formerly known as Skye," Fury cracked a tiny smile. "I know who she is, Agent Simmons." He extended a large hand to Daisy. "When two infamous

people meet, there's really not all that much need for formal introductions."

Daisy laughed at that. "Infamous, indeed, sir." She put out her own smaller hand to shake his.

Fury grunted with pain as Daisy gasped; both of them stared incredulously at their hands, stepping back from each other. Rows of tiny symbols and dots marched over Fury's palm, leading him to say incredulously "Wait, that's *Kree!*" even as Daisy gasped;

"What the *actual fuck?*" as she stared at the all-seeing eye now permanently imprinted on her own hand.

"How come *you* recognise Kree script, sir?" Jemma focussed on what, to Daisy, was a distinctly unimportant question at the moment.

At least until Fury took a step back, looking distinctly uncomfortable at Jemma's question, and Sif said

"*Kartaw n'zhyr 'ys?*"

Fury actually looked as though he was about to bolt, but Sif had her sword out in an instant. "Who are you?" she demanded. Fandral, Hogun and Volstagg, realizing that something was up, leaped to their feet, reaching for weapons.

Spreading his hands and still failing to look harmless, Fury replied "Who I am is no concern of yours, milady. The All-Father ordered me banished to Midgard before any of you were even born."

Sif didn't lower her sword, and to her own surprise Daisy found herself stepping instinctively between Fury and the tip of that drawn blade.

"Put it down, Sif, or you're going to find out just why Inhumans are regarded as the bogeymen of the Nine Realms," she said coolly.

Sif looked utterly shocked, and Fury reached out to gently touch Daisy's shoulder.

"No need for threats here. I am no threat to them, and you do not want to set the Inhumans up in opposition to Asgard's representatives. You've got plenty of problems right here on Midgard without picking fights off-planet."

Sif lowered her sword then, looking at them both. "Wait," she said, "I have only ever heard of one Asgardian being banished to Midgard permanently, Lord Nihk..."

"Your brother, you mean?" Fandral said tactlessly, and Fury's jaw dropped.

"What?" he said numbly.

Sif was staring at him incredulously. "All my life, Heimdall has told me of you," she said, "of our older brother who challenged Odin himself for Asgard's crown..."

"And lost. I should have followed Heimdall's path and served the All-Father," Fury said bluntly.

Daisy was looking from one to the other of them in amazement. "You two are brother and sister?" she asked disbelievingly, looking at Fury's black skin and Sif's paleness.

"Skin colour characteristics aren't inherited through Asgardian genes the same way that they are in Midgardian," unexpectedly it was Volstagg who spoke, because Sif and Fury were just staring at each other.

Jemma immediately looked fascinated and drew Volstagg away to start pelting him with questions. Fitz, still looking deeply flustered, looked from Daisy to the newly discovered siblings and back again.

"I guess this is gonna make us in-laws, huh?" Daisy said with a sudden grin.

"Hah," Fitz barked a startled laugh. "I'm not used to the idea of having an Asgardian

soulmate yet and now I'm finding out that Director Fury is not only going to be my brother-in-law but that you're *his* soulmate. So forgive me if I don't start calling you 'sister' just yet."

"Why not, you've been treating me like one since we first met," Daisy snickered, suddenly seeing the funny side of the whole situation.

Fury and Sif finally looked away from each other at the sound of their soulmates' hysterical laughter. Daisy and Fitz were literally holding each other up, laughing like hyenas.

"Do you think they will share the joke?" Sif asked a little uncertainly.

"I'm guessing we really don't want them to!"

"All these years on Midgard and you still don't understand their humour? Thank goodness for that. I thought it was just me!"

***Chapter 53*: Balancing The Scales (Sif/Matt Murdock)**

Sif eyed the three-dimensional holographic map hovering in the middle of the room with some trepidation. "'Tis a very great city, Thor."

"It is, greater than any I have ever seen. Midgardians tolerate living in far closer quarters than any other race I have ever known." Thor manipulated the hologram skilfully. "The Man of Iron has used his *facial recognition algorithms* and found a number of locations where Odin has been present over the last few months. He moves about a good deal, and often chooses to avoid locations where surveillance is present."

Sif sighed, considering the red-dotted locations which sprang up on the hologram. "If only he were not invisible to Heimdall's Sight," she murmured.

"Then this search would be unnecessary." Thor gestured, a broad sweep of his hand selecting a closely-bunched group of the red dots. "This area is called 'Hell's Kitchen'."

"It sounds quite charming," Sif said, her tone dust-dry.

Thor's mouth twitched into a half-smile. "Stark says that it is not half so bad as it sounds. I thought that you could perhaps survey this area over the next day or two while I take this grouping over here, in 'Harlem'."

"Of course," Sif nodded in agreement. "A copy of the map would be useful?"

Thor offered one of the Midgardian communication devices Sif had seen her friends at SHIELD use. "Loaded onto this phone for you."

"Thank you." She accepted the 'phone', played with the interface for a few moments until she figured it out. A simple, but rather interesting device. The map was converted to two dimensions, but since all the sightings of Odin were at street level anyway, that did not matter at all. Sif oriented herself and slipped the device into the pocket of her leather jacket. "I shall set out directly."

"Do you not wish to break your fast before you leave?" Thor asked.

"No. I enjoy the drink called 'coffee', I have found... I shall purchase some, and some food as I walk."

"Yes, coffee is good, is it not?" Thor nodded enthusiastically. "You should try 'Pop-Tarts' as well... although I am not sure that they serve those in coffee houses."

Sif decided that she would not ask. Thor did, occasionally, develop peculiar interests. He might even be teasing her. 'Pop-Tarts' did not sound especially appetizing, whatever they might be. She took her leave without committing to try them, purchasing a coffee and a breakfast pastry

at a cafe she passed on the next block to the Tower and consuming them as she walked towards Hell's Kitchen.

The area was not one tenth so intimidating as the name suggested, she decided after walking the streets for a few hours. Indeed, many of the streets were positively gentrified, the businesses active, the clientele well-dressed. There were few of the shambling, weary 'homeless' within sight, not on the main streets, anyway. Thoughtfully, Sif checked her phone, scanned the red dots and noted the locations of the surveillance units which had picked up on Odin's presence. He had not remained within sight of any of them for long, just passing through.

Putting the phone away again, Sif looked around, noting the mouth of a narrow alley nearby. She moved forward to look along it. No cameras there. Plenty of places for someone to hide, and she thought those large metal containers were used for rubbish. A desperate person might find food there.

A few steps into the alley and she realized another purpose that such a small, dark, confined area might serve for the denizens of the neighborhood. The stench of urine was strong; she covered her mouth and nose with her hand and walked on more quickly.

The alley was empty of life - except for a few rats nosing around one of the Dumpsters - but Sif was sure now that such a place was where she might find Odin. Returning to the main street, she looked around for the entrance to another such alley.

A long day searching dingy, stinking alleys later, darkness was falling and she considered quitting and returning to the Tower. Thor had not called, though, which meant that his search had been equally fruitless. She checked her map once more; she had covered all but a small portion of her allotted area. Considering her options, she entered a nearby bodega.

"I wish to purchase a portable light, to use after darkness falls," she did her best to speak as she had heard Midgardians do.

"A flashlight, y'mean," the man at the counter said. "Third aisle, near the end, with the other hardware."

"A flashlight, yes. Thank you." Armed with the correct word, Sif checked the indicated aisle and found the labelled items, selected a long slim Maglite that could slide up her sleeve - and double as a weapon in a pinch, she considered. A quick look at the paper money Stark had provided her with and she selected a few notes, returned to the counter.

"Y'all be wantin' batteries too, miss?"

"Batteries..."

"To make it work. Won't work without batteries." A packet was slapped down on the counter in front of her.

"Ah. Thank you." She picked out another note and handed it over, not seeing how the man's eyes widened at the thick wad of money she put back into her jacket pocket. He became suddenly even more helpful, offering to put the batteries in for her, asking if there was anything else she needed.

"No, I thank you." Sliding the now-loaded Maglite up her sleeve, she left the store, glancing up at the rapidly-darkening sky. Behind her, the clerk pulled out his phone, peering out the window after her.

Sif was moving from the third alley to the fourth after buying the flashlight when she realized she was being followed. Three men, doing their best to be stealthy but failing completely. The streets of Hell's Kitchen seemed quite different after dark, she thought; far fewer people moving about, those who were staying in small groups for the most part. *Not a safe place*

for a woman alone, she thought, and smiled to herself, catching a glimpse of the flash of her own white teeth in a store window as she checked it for the reflections of her pursuers. *But then, I am not just any woman. Dealing with these fools will be nothing but a public service.*

Walking deep into the alley, she made a point of acting just as she had in the previous ones, shining the beam of her flashlight into the darkest corners. This alley had no human inhabitants, unlike some of the previous ones; no wary eyes peered back at her. Reaching the end of the alley, she turned, bracing her stance, and deliberately shone the light directly into the eyes of the three men who had followed her.

All three flinched back, but only briefly. They kept right on coming. “No need for that, girlie,” one of them said. “Just hand over that nice wad of cash and we’ll be on our way, no harm done.”

“Dunno about that, Joe,” another remarked, eyes running greedily over Sif’s form. “She’s a beauty. We could have a bit of fun first, couldn’t we, beautiful?”

“Fun will be had,” Sif agreed, “but I think, not the kind you are expecting.” Wondering suddenly if the flashlight would still work if she used it as a truncheon, she clicked it off and slid it back up her sleeve. Better safe than sorry, and it was not as though she needed it. The sudden absence of light was an advantage in and of itself, as her would-be assailants blinked frantically, their night vision entirely ruined.

Just about to leap down from the rooftop where he’d been observing the three mooks he’d heard planning to mug the woman who’d been dumb enough to flash a huge wad of cash in a Hell’s Kitchen bodega, Matt Murdock paused.

There was no fear whatsoever in the woman’s voice, and her accent was extremely curious, like none he’d ever heard before. In the melting-pot of New York, he thought he’d heard just about every accent on Earth.

Something is strange, here...

Two rapid steps and Sif was driving her elbow into the face of the nearest would-be mugger. His cheekbone and nose crumpled under the pile-driving power of Asgardian muscle and bone, and he went down in a boneless heap without even a whimper.

A side-kick sent the second man flying almost sixty feet, crashing into a Dumpster near the mouth of the alley before he too crumpled and lay still.

The third man only had time to take a single step backwards. His retreat bought him a small mercy; the punch Sif drove into his midriff was very slightly less powerful than it might otherwise have been.

He still hit the opposite wall so hard that bricks crumbled and fell on him as he slumped to the ground.

“Holy Mary, Mother of God,” a shocked voice said above her, and Sif’s head snapped up. “Who is there?” she said sharply. “Show yourself!”

Her eyes widened with surprise as a masked man in a dark red leather suit leaped agilely down from a fire escape, landing about fifteen feet away from her in a wary crouch.

“Who the hell *are* you?” he demanded. “Even Jessica Jones doesn’t hit that hard!”

“I do not know who this Jessica Jones is, but I think I would probably like her.” Sif smiled, showing her teeth. There was something interesting about this man, about the way he moved; he did not seem to look directly at her, either, keeping his head tilted down and slightly turned away. Almost as though he was listening to her rather than looking at her.

“You’re blind,” she said in surprised discovery.

The man froze. "How... you cannot *possibly* tell that."

"Indeed I can. When I underwent my training, I ran many exercises blindfolded, learning to rely on senses other than my sight. I recognise your posture."

"Who the hell *are* you?" Matt asked again, more confused than ever.

Sif sensed no threat in him, despite his garb. No threat to *her*, at any rate. "I am the Lady Sif, of Asgard. And you?"

Matt hesitated before saying "They call me the Devil of Hell's Kitchen. Or Daredevil." He shrugged slightly. "This is... my territory, if that makes sense to you. I was about to intercept these..." he swept his hand around vaguely. "... well. Clearly you didn't need my help."

Sif had to smile. "The fact that you planned to offer it was most gallant, though. Your intention is appreciated."

"And your help in cleaning up some of the scum of my city is also appreciated, ma'am." Matt gave her a slight bow. "Although I really do have to ask what *your* intentions are?"

"I am looking for my King."

"... the King of Asgard is likely to be found in a dingy alley in Hell's Kitchen?"

"Regrettably, yes. And if this is indeed your territory, perhaps you might help me find him?"

Matt surveyed the Asgardian woman curiously. He'd heard Thor speak before, on TV broadcasts, and while her accent was a little different, she still sounded a lot more like the alien prince than any Earth accent he knew. Asgard probably had regional variations in dialect too, he supposed.

"I hope you'll forgive me if I'm a little doubtful, but the King of Asgard hiding out in Hell's Kitchen is really stretching my suspension of disbelief," he said.

"I understand," Sif said with a regretful nod. "It is a long story, beginning with Loki's perfidy..."

"Oh, *now* I'm starting to believe you," Matt said with a grin. "I think I probably don't need the whole story if that's the case. 'Because Loki' is actually a pretty valid explanation all by itself."

Sif surprised him with a chuckle. "Yes, 'Because Loki' has been considered a valid explanation on Asgard for quite a number of centuries now."

They snickered in mutual amusement for a minute before Matt straightened up and offered his hand to her. "I'll be glad to help you find your King if it thwarts a plan of Loki's, my lady."

"I thank you, Mr Daredevil."

"Just call me Matt." He was surprised when she grasped onto his wrist instead of taking his hand, but went with it, gripping hers in return. As she let go, though, the tip of her middle finger brushed against a tiny patch of skin where his sleeve had pulled back from his glove a little bit.

Her touch burned like fire against his skin; even Matt, accustomed to having the crap beaten out of him on a regular basis, yelled with shock at the extreme pain, jerking back away from Sif. She was crying out in pain too, cradling her hand to her chest, hunching over.

"What the fuck," Matt panted, trying to get his breath back. Gingerly, he probed at his wrist with his free hand, tugged his glove off with his teeth to feel more carefully. The pain had vanished as quickly as it came, but he could feel something left behind on his skin, almost like a

brand, raised fine lines on his flesh. His fingertips stuttered as he traced slowly over them; while it was nothing he recognized, somehow he was sure that the shapes *meant* something. “What the fuck did you do to me?”

Sif’s breathing sounded ragged; he could hear her heart pounding fast. “Soulmate,” she stumbled out, her voice shaky. “You - you are my soulmate!”

“I don’t have words!”

“Nor do I; Asgardians are not as humans. We recognize our soulmates at first touch.” He sensed her moving closer; tensed briefly, trying to tell himself that she meant him no harm. He was pretty sure she could break him in half without raising a sweat if she felt like it. “May I?”

Reluctantly he held out his hand, palm uppermost. Heard her click her flashlight on, felt the warm light beam over his wrist.

“My name and sigil,” Sif said quietly, though she did not touch him. “And on the tip of my finger is what appears to be a tiny set of weighing scales - one side of which holds an image of your mask.”

“The scales of justice,” Matt murmured, half-smiling. “Well, yes, I suppose that’s appropriate. Is there anything on the other side of the scale?”

“My sigil, again. Levelling it.” Slowly and cautiously, Sif reached out, touched the hand he’d removed the glove from. “I have searched for you for many long years, Matt. These may be unusual circumstances, but I am very glad to have found you.”

“Me too,” he agreed, feeling her long fingers curl gently into his. A distant sound caught his ear and he tilted his head. “We need to go. The police are coming, and being found here with three bodies would be a pretty bad look, even if you do have diplomatic immunity as a representative of Asgard.”

“Do I?”

“Probably? But I’d rather not have to argue it in court, if it’s all the same to you.” Matt gestured at the fire escape he’d jumped down from. “Let’s get out of here. And then you can fill me on on the whole story with what Loki’s done that’s caused Odin to be AWOL down here, and we’ll find him.”

“And after that, we shall take some time to talk of you and I, and what our future may hold,” Sif leaped easily to the first landing of the fire escape.

“Can’t wait!” Matt scrambled up after her.

***Chapter 54*: Reunited (Logan/Helen Cho)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Characters%202/Chogan_zpsmoyuldhv.jpg-REPLACE_ME

“Where is she?”

Darcy paused in her walking, almost fell off the treadmill. Hastily hit the emergency stop. She’d know that husky growl anywhere. She’d been waiting for him to arrive for the last couple of days, while Dr Cho and Dr Banner kept her ‘under observation’ in the Tower’s med-bay... which she half-suspected was ‘under house arrest’ while the Avengers tried to figure out where Victor had gone and what the hell he was up to.

“What are you doing?” Helen asked. “Keep walking, Darcy, that new ligament needs to be worked to stay flexible...”

“And I need to be able to concentrate on facing down what’s about to come in through that door.”

Said door promptly flew open with a crash, almost coming off its hinges in the process, and Logan came striding through the doorway, hair even bristlier than usual. Darcy instinctively looked at his hands; clenched into fists, but no blades showed between his knuckles. She probably didn’t have to worry about being instantaneously skewered, then.

“*You*,” Logan said, staring at her from his intense eyes. “You... I would never have thought *you* could be a mate for my brother!”

Darcy bristled at his tone, straightening up and folding her arms across her chest defensively. “Well, I am, so what are you going to do about it?”

Logan’s eyes narrowed, and he took a step forward, hands coming up as if to grab her. Quick as lightning, Helen stepped in between them.

“How dare you barge your way in here and harass my patient!”

She was a good deal shorter than Logan and probably a third of his weight dripping wet, but Logan backed off from her wide-eyed as though she’d suddenly Hulked out right in front of him. He backed up so far he went right out through the doorway, never taking his eyes off Helen. A slender red-haired woman moved into the doorway, blocking Helen’s puzzled stare after the retreating Wolverine.

“Good morning, Darcy,” the woman said in a soft voice. “I’m Jean Grey.”

“Of course you are,” Darcy said with a sigh. Because of course the X-Men had sent a mind-reader to check her out, make sure she wasn’t going to be a dangerous traitor in the Avengers’ midst... that she wasn’t going to be corrupted by Victor. She held her anger at the very idea at the forefront of her mind, saw Jean wince lightly.

“You don’t need to shout,” Jean said mildly. “I get it. Um, Doctor Cho, is it?” She smiled at Helen, who was still frowning at the door, puzzled. “I think that you should probably speak with Logan privately. I assure you that you’re in no danger from him.”

“Darcy?” Helen checked. “Are you okay here?”

“I’m fine. I’m pretty sure that I’m in no danger from Ms. Grey,” Darcy waved her away. “Go find out what got Mr Cranky’s panties in a bunch.”

The mental image of the intimidating Wolverine having his panties in a bunch almost had Helen giggling as she accepted Darcy’s assurance and left her with Jean, going to look for Logan. They’d never met - he was the least likely mutant ever to be in need of her medical skills, apart from possibly Deadpool - but she knew who he was, of course. He’d been working with the Avengers for some time now even if he wasn’t quite officially one of them.

He wasn’t in the hallway outside the physio room where she’d been supervising Darcy’s exercise; she looked left and right, wondering where he’d gone... and inconsequentially wondering if he even wore underwear.

Hell, she hoped Ms. Grey hadn’t picked up on that thought. She was probably used to it, though. Most women who got a good look at Logan Howlett probably started thinking about his underwear, or lack of.

“Uh, Helen,” Bruce poked his head out of the lab, “I just saw Logan go into your office... everything all right?”

“Of course,” she waved him to return to his work. She couldn’t believe that she was in any danger from Logan, especially not considering the way he’d backed off from *her*.

He was indeed in her office, standing at the window looking out, his hands braced on the

windowsill, brow pressed against the glass. Helen was quite sure he'd heard her come in, but he didn't turn around.

I will not be ignored in my own office, I don't care who he is or how broad his shoulders are... she tore her eyes away from those beautiful shoulders, straining at the seams of his battered denim jacket, and deliberately slammed the door as hard as she could.

Logan started and turned around, eyes widening as he saw her standing there, hands propped on her hips, staring at him.

"What the hell was that?" Helen demanded. "You looked at me like you'd seen a ghost!"

Logan swallowed convulsively, licked at his lips. He opened his mouth a couple of times as though about to speak, but each time seemed to think better of it, leaving Helen staring at him in puzzlement.

"In a manner of speaking," Logan rasped out finally, "I did."

It was Helen's turn to take a step back, her eyes widening, her right hand flying up to press on the inside of her left forearm, where those seven words had been scrawled in a crude, spiky, intensely black script from the moment of her birth. It was those words that had spurred her to excel in school, determined to learn English perfectly so that she might better understand the cryptic message when she finally heard it.

Knowing that Logan Howlett was almost two hundred years old, she thought she might finally understand.

"How many times have we met before?" she asked softly.

"Just the once," Logan replied, equally quietly, gazing at her intensely. "I got words in French, in 1910; I assumed incorrectly that we'd meet in Canada, but it was in Paris, in 1941."

The tone of his voice, the darkness in his eyes, told her that it hadn't ended well. That the woman who had been her soul's vessel before Helen had suffered a terrible fate. Nazi-occupied Paris hadn't exactly been a safe place in 1941.

"Tell me," she asked, compelled to know.

"Her name was Amélie... she was a doctor, and secretly helping the French Resistance, treating the wounded. I met her when I was trying to get a friend out of the country; he'd been wounded and needed help. The Resistance brought Amélie to us." Logan's eyes were far away as he remembered. "She never knew what I was. I had to get my friend out of the country; I promised I'd be back for her. It took me three weeks to get back, and when I did, she was gone. The Nazis found her stitching up a wounded British airman. Amélie killed two men with a scalpel before they shot her down." His gaze snapped back into focus, zeroed in on Helen. "I heard that you fought back against Ultron. I should have guessed then, come to look for you."

She wasn't sure what to say to that. "I don't remember her," she said at last. "I'm sorry..."

"I barely even knew her. We had a single night together, and what was done to my memory meant I didn't even remember her until recently," Logan shook his head immediately. "Don't apologize for not being Amélie, Helen."

She took a tentative step towards him; he met her halfway, lifting his hand towards her; she lifted her palm and pressed it against his, looking at the relative size of her slim, delicately boned hand against his massive one with amusement. Logan's fingers folded gently around hers, and he drew her hand to his face, pressed his lips lightly against her knuckles.

"I don't want to rush you," he said raggedly, "but I don't think I can let you out of my sight."

That was quite understandable, actually, considering that Amélie had been murdered by Nazis almost as soon Logan had let *her* out of his sight. Helen smiled, making no attempt to withdraw her hand from his grasp.

"I'm pretty sure we can figure something out. As long as you don't insist on accompanying me into the ladies' room, anyway." She fixed him with a firm stare. He needed to know from the beginning that there were some things that were non-negotiable.

Logan considered that, conceded with a nod. He'd be able to hear her from outside the door, anyway. His expression darkened slightly as he thought that it was doubly important now to make sure that Victor really had changed sides, that Darcy was no threat. He didn't think he could bear to lose Helen as he'd lost Amélie; somehow he had a second chance with his beautiful, brilliant doctor soulmate and this time around, he was going to devote himself to making sure that her need to help others didn't jeopardize her safety.

There was little about her physically to remind him of Amélie; the Frenchwoman had been short, plumpish and fair-haired with blue-eyes, very different to Helen's slender, dark-eyed, golden-skinned Korean beauty. The indomitable will behind those eyes was the same, though, the compassion, the intelligence. Gazing lost into her eyes, Logan lost track of time entirely.

Neither of them even heard the door open.

"Ahem," Jean said, and they both turned to look at her, Logan instinctively moving forward to put himself between Helen and Jean.

Jean smiled at the gesture; held her hands up in a gesture of surrender. "Darcy's quite safe, Logan," she informed him, "and I cannot see any way, beyond *major* mental adjustment, that she would ever be a party to any villainous schemes."

That was reassuring, but he still couldn't quite believe that Victor was really reformed. And until he was quite certain that there was no threat to Helen from his renegade brother, he'd be watching over her like a hawk.

Not that it would be any hardship... he felt her slender hand slip back into his, her slight body lean against his back. And for the first time in many, many years, Logan Howlett relaxed.

***Chapter 55*: A Last Resort (Stephen Strange/Daisy Johnson)**

SPECIAL_IMAGE-http://i1383.photobucket.com/albums/ah309/Catherine_Bilson/Shorts%20Covers%202/StrangeQuake_zps4b1gffoy.jpg-REPLACE_ME

"So Thanos isn't just here for the Eye of Agamotto and the Mindstone?" Stephen stared at the tall redhead in the red leather jacket. "There's something *else* on Earth that he wants? Please tell me it's not another Infinity Stone that I don't know about?"

Peter shook his head. "No, it's something else. Or rather, *someone* else. One of our informants told us that Thanos is looking for an Inhuman who can manipulate vibrations, on both large and small scales. That he believes she may be the key to handling the Infinity Stones."

"That's the Gauntlet," Stephen corrected.

"Except that you have to be able to handle them to put them *in* the Gauntlet. They don't take kindly to being handled." Peter shuddered as he remembered the time he'd wielded the Orb. Not fun. Not fun at all. "This Inhuman could potentially sense and match the natural vibrations of each of the Stones, and therefore handle them without any unfortunate consequences."

"Oh, I see... where have I seen something about an Inhuman who can wield vibrations?"

Stephen frowned, searching his memory. “Ah, I recall - Quake! She’s with SHIELD, I believe.”

“Well, SHIELD and the Avengers are gonna be his first targets when he gets here, Doc.” Peter grinned wryly at him. “So I suggest you go find her and make sure she’s someplace where Thanos *can’t* find her.”

“Why can’t you do that?”

“Because I have to head back out and join up with the others doing their level best to distract Thanos and slow him down so that Earth has more time to prepare before he gets here. Before I do that, I gotta go and convince Captain America and Iron Man to start sharing their toys again, so I’m a *little bit busy*, oh Sorcerer Supreme.”

“Thank you, Mr Quill, I don’t believe the sarcasm was necessary.”

“Just fun. Later!” Peter waved his fingers at Stephen before departing.

Left alone, Stephen sighed before going to get his Cloak, and with only a brief wince, the Eye of Agamotto. Wong gave him a reproving look for taking it from the Sanctum Sanctorum, but he needed to know if the Inhuman really could handle in Infinity Stone without the extensive training he’d been through, the research he’d done and the books he’d read. Idly, as he focussed and sent his mind ranging, preparing to open a portal to SHIELD’s headquarters, he wondered if it was possible for an Inhuman to become a sorcerer. He’d never had the opportunity to meet or study one; Wong said that they were already intimately tied to the multiverse, but only to one specific aspect of it. Being able to manipulate vibrations didn’t seem specific, though. Everything had its own natural frequency of vibration.

The portal spun to life between his hands and he stepped through into the giant aircraft hangar. Unsurprisingly, several nearby people dropped their tools and drew guns to point at him.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he said crisply, “I just stepped out of an extradimensional portal. Do you really think bullets are going to do anything? I’d like to speak with your Director, please.”

“Which one?” someone said, before being hastily shushed. A tall black man with a weird-looking weapon in his hands - was it a shotgun, an axe or some hybrid of both? - stepped forward.

“Agent Mackenzie,” he said by way of introduction.

“Stephen Strange, Sorcerer Supreme,” Stephen responded, and Agent Mackenzie nodded as though completely unsurprised.

“Thought you might be. This way, please.”

The man he’s seen on television as the face of SHIELD awaited him in an office, accompanied by another, shorter man with a plain face who Stephen instantly assessed as being a lot more than he looked.

“Director Jeffery,” he greeted, holding his hand out to shake. “I apologize for dropping in unexpectedly like this, but I’m afraid it’s rather urgent.”

“So I guessed, Doctor Strange.” Mace shook his hand before gesturing to the man beside him. “Agent Phil Coulson, my director of operations.”

The power behind the throne, Stephen thought, shaking Phil’s hand. Or maybe Mace was just a front because Phil actually preferred to work in the shadows? Who knew. Either way, he was quite sure that it was Coulson who would make the decision about whether he would be meeting Quake today.

“So,” he began, “I’m assuming that you’ve been briefed about Thanos.”

Both men’s faces grew serious; Coulson nodded. “Yes, and we are beginning our own

preparations. What can we do for you?"

"I need Quake."

There was silence for a moment before Mace said "Quake is integral to SHIELD operations, Strange."

"I have no doubt that she is, but unfortunately she is also integral to Thanos' plans, and part of my job is to make sure that he doesn't get his hands on her."

Coulson and Mace looked at each other for a moment before Coulson got up and went to the door. "Mack, would you get Daisy for me, please?" he asked Agent Mackenzie, who was waiting outside.

It wasn't long before the door opened and a small, slight woman slipped into the room. Dark brown eyes fixed on Stephen as she approached; he felt pierced to the core by her gaze, disturbed in a way he had not been since his first meeting with the Ancient One.

"So you're the one," he said, transfixed by those midnight eyes. To his Inner Eye, she almost glowed with power; a different kind to the one he tapped, but she was bound to the hidden energies of the universe even more intimately.

Daisy's finely drawn brows flew up and she drew back a step. "I really didn't expect you to say *that*."

Stephen blinked, took a step back himself. "What?"

Daisy was wearing a close-fitting black jacket with a SHIELD patch on the shoulder; she unzipped it, stripped it off. Rolled up the sleeve of the thin black sweater she was wearing underneath. "I'm guessing you might be able to recreate this handwriting quite nicely?"

He'd always been considered unusual for a surgeon in that his handwriting had never degenerated into the slapdash scrawl that doctors were so infamous for. Sloppy and lazy, his precise, razor-sharp intellect had deemed that habit, and so he had learned to write extremely fast but very neatly. The crisp script he had developed was unmistakable, sharply delineated black lines forming the words on the inside of Daisy's smooth, muscled right bicep.

She worked out, Stephen found himself thinking as he moved closer to gaze at the words. Their position would match perfectly with the ones in a slapdash, hasty scrawl that had appeared on his left side when he was in middle school. He'd despised their untidiness at the time, but over the years he'd grown used to the idea that his soulmate wouldn't necessarily be exactly like him in all ways, that sometimes opposites could attract.

Daisy was looking up at him from those big dark brown eyes, a small smile on her lips as she took in his appearance, his height and bearing, the chiselled features he knew had always drawn women's attention. Her next remark, though, threw him.

"I like your cloak."

"I only hope it likes you too," came out of Stephen's mouth before he could bite it back; her brows raised. He felt the Cloak shift around him slightly, pulling towards her; it was certainly intrigued, he realized.

"Not now," he said aloud, speaking to the Cloak, but realizing even as he did so that it was just as applicable to his newly discovered soulmateship with Daisy. "This is... the timing is... I came here because I need to find you. Thanos is coming."

Daisy's expression grew grim and she nodded. "I know. SHIELD is preparing, but it sounds like there is something else you would want from me?"

"There is," Stephen nodded. "I've received intelligence that you, or rather your abilities, are very interesting to Thanos."

Daisy paled at that. "I would rather *not* be interesting to Thanos, thanks very much." She paused then, glanced at Coulson. "Last resort time is coming, right?"

Coulson's eyes narrowed, but he gave a reluctant nod, and Daisy turned back to face her soulmate, looking up into his blue eyes.

"Have you ever heard of something called the Darkhold?"

***Chapter 56*: Not Much Of A Talker (Frank Castle/Natasha Roma...**

Natasha repressed a twitch at the first distant sound of gunfire. Her jaw clenched very slightly, unnoticeable to the men and women she was sitting at a table with. *I told those idiots to give me at least 48 hours, it hasn't even been 12 yet...*

"What is that?" one of the men said as the gunfire continued.

"Sounds like a minigun," one of the others said, making Natasha reassess him thoughtfully. And then her own assumption. None of the Avengers carried a minigun.

Which meant it was somebody else out there, getting steadily closer...

... and if they were launching an attack on the scumbag leaders of this people-smuggling ring, it was time for Natasha to bug out before she got caught in the crossfire, or had to fight her way out.

The lights conveniently went out, and Natasha made her move. She ended up going out through a third-storey window in a shower of glass, catching onto a fire escape on the next-door building and going up and over to escape. Whoever was ambushing the human traffickers didn't intend to escape.

Curious about the assailant - because despite the terrific racket of gunfire, she was pretty sure there was only one - she doubled back at ground level. At the corner, she found a dog sitting on the pavement, ears pricked, staring intently at the building she'd just left.

"Hello, fella," Nat said softly. "Waiting for someone?"

The dog, a scarred pit bull, glanced up at her and whined softly before looking back at the building again, ears pricked forward.

She didn't particularly want to get any closer, not with all that gunfire still going on. She only had a single pistol at the small of her back, and no spare ammunition clips. With a shrug, she pulled off her black wig and tossed it in a nearby trashcan, fluffing her red curls as they tumbled free.

"I guess I'll wait here with you then, huh?" Tentatively she reached out and scratched the dog's scarred, ridged head. He seemed to enjoy the attention, turning his head to give her fingers a quick lick before looking back at the building again. The building which was now on fire, Natasha observed.

"Is your master in there? I hope he's okay. If he doesn't come back, you'd better come home with me, huh?" There was a tag on the dog's collar, she spotted; turning it, she angled it in the light.

"Buddy. That's a nice name." Despite his scars, the dog looked well-cared for, with a glossy, shining coat, solid with muscle, and all the scars were old and long-healed. This dog was a former fighting dog who'd been rescued and rehabilitated, Natasha thought, and her curiosity about the owner rose a notch further. It took patience to turn a brutalised fighting creature into

one loyal enough to wait before a burning building. She should know.

Frank strode back down the street, still-smoking gun tipped back over his shoulder. He could feel the warmth from the flames on his back as he walked away from the building. He didn't smile with satisfaction, but there was a warm feeling in the pit of his belly. Those scumbags wouldn't be trafficking any more terrified children into Hell's Kitchen's brothels.

Buddy was waiting patiently at the corner where Frank had ordered him to stay. But... the dog wasn't alone, there was someone standing beside him, patting Buddy's head. Damn dog was a complete sucker for anyone who'd show him a bit of kindness. Frank shook his head, quickening his pace a little, lowering his gun to hold beside his leg, hoping that the poorly-lit street and the folds of his long coat might help conceal it somewhat.

It was a woman petting Buddy, he saw as he got closer, one with a tumble of bright red curls and a very fine figure shown off beautifully by tight black leather pants and a strapless black top.

What the hell is a woman like that doing here? Wary, he slipped his finger back inside the trigger guard of his gun again. He could hear sirens now, not too far away. It was time to get out of there.

"Do you always make that much mess?" the woman said, her full lips curving into a smile as she looked past Frank towards the building, flames leaping higher.

Whatever he'd expected her to say, that was not it, and for more than one reason. He gaped at her, jaw hanging wide open, trying to think of something to say in response.

"I guess I owe you one, anyway, you saved me the trouble."

A police car rounded the corner less than fifty yards away, and Natasha quickly moved to stand beside the man. "We're just a couple out for a late night stroll with our dog," she said, hand closing around the butt of the gun and pushing it under Frank's coat. He stank of smoke and gunpowder; if the police stopped them she'd have to do the talking and hope they didn't recognize her. Maybe she shouldn't have dumped the wig, but it was *itchy*.

Buddy trotted happily along at Frank's heels as they started walking, Natasha threading her hand through his arm, smiling as he instinctively crooked it for her. "I'm Nat, by the way," she said conversationally. "You're The Punisher, I take it. I hope so, anyway. I haven't heard of anyone else in the city who likes to make that kind of mess, and I should have."

He still couldn't think of anything to say, so he just nodded silently as another police car screeched past them. He'd recognized her now; that face was unmistakable up close. The words on the outside of his left hip seemed to burn; surely the Black Widow couldn't be *his* soulmate?

On the other hand, who better? She too fought for the greater good, took the blood on her own hands to spare the innocent. Her body count was probably even higher than his own.

"You're not much of a talker, are you?" Natasha said as they turned a corner and finally went out of sight of the burning building.

Frank licked his lips. "You've got me a bit tongue-tied, to be honest," he admitted.

Natasha's confident stride stuttered, and he knew.

"I'd say that I'm sorry, but you must have expected someone like me," Frank said as she recovered her balance.

Natasha slanted a look up at him, her lips curling into a smile. She was quite tiny really, he thought; even in the high-heeled boots she wore the top of her head only came to his chin.

"Oh, I don't know," Natasha drawled. "I never dared to hope you'd be this handsome."

He hadn't blushed since he was a teenager, but he felt the color rush into his cheeks now. She laughed softly, squeezed his arm. "Hey, we're off to a great start. You did me the enormous favor of killing those assholes, and you have an absolutely *adorable* dog."

Frank found a smile cracking his face. "I think Buddy likes you, too."

Natasha leaned her head against his shoulder, smiling as well. "I get the complete package... a handsome, capable man and a delightful dog. Lucky me."

He was the lucky one, Frank decided as they walked onward through the night. He was definitely the lucky one.

***Chapter 57*: Gimme Gimme Gimme (Jemma Simmons/Stephen Strang...**

"Time to get to *work*," Jemma said aloud into the empty lab. Everything was such a mess, and she had nobody to help her put it all back together. With a sigh, she snapped on a pair of heavy-duty rubber gloves.

Amazingly, her computer had survived intact, and so had the lab's speakers. She pulled up her music app and looked for some songs with an upbeat, poppy vibe; dragging a bunch of them into a playlist, she hit Play and got to work.

A couple of hours later she was tired but still working when an old favourite came on. Unable to resist, Jemma started singing along, jiving to the beat.

"Gimme gimme gimme a man after midnight, won't somebody help me chase the shadows away," she caroled at the top of her voice, hip-checking a file cabinet drawer closed. "Gimme gimme gimme a man after midnight, take me through the darkness to the break of the day..."

Movement in her peripheral vision made her turn her head and she trailed off, staring in horror at the tall, dark-haired man standing at the open doorway of the lab.

Doctor Stephen Strange had turned up within minutes of Ghost Rider's departure through the Gate with the Darkhold. Jemma knew who he was, or had been, anyway. He'd been considered one of the finest surgeons alive before his car accident and disappearing off the face of the earth.

Apparently wherever he'd disappeared to, he'd got into some pretty strange stuff. The clothes were a bit of a giveaway; they looked almost Asgardian, particularly considering the cloak, which was the first question Coulson had asked.

"No, I've been in Tibet," Strange had answered abstractedly, gazing at the now-dormant Gate. "This is *fascinating*. Absolutely proscribed, of course, even to the Sorcerer Supreme - *who* did you say built it?"

Unable to bear talking about Radcliffe and AIDA, the wounds still too fresh, Jemma made her escape and headed to the lab. Why Dr Strange stood here now, she couldn't understand, but she'd just made an utter idiot of herself dancing and singing along to ABBA in front of him.

"Oh my god, how long have you been standing there?" she said in horror.

Strange looked startled, but then smiled, his slightly austere face transformed to handsomeness by the expression. Jemma was reminded suddenly of the gigantic crush she'd nursed on the brilliant surgeon ever since she first started studying biochemistry and medicine. Her face flamed red.

"Long enough to like what I see," Strange said, and it was Jemma's turn to startle, her hand flying instinctively to the spot just beneath her right breast where those words were written in a precise, cramped hand.

Stephen lifted his hand too, pressed it to a spot on his ribs, his dark blue eyes holding hers meaningfully. The cloak hanging from his shoulders rippled suddenly, even though there was no air movement in the lab.

Jemma blinked, her eyes narrowing. She'd seen enough weird stuff over the last few years to know when something that couldn't be explained by science as she knew it was going on.

"Stop it," Stephen said.

"Stop what?"

"Not you, sorry..." His hands came up and he grasped the edges of his cloak firmly. "No. She's *my* soulmate."

Jemma gasped as the cloak jerked upwards, literally yanking Stephen off his feet.

"Oh, crap!" Stephen gasped, and suddenly he was being propelled towards her. With a little shriek, Jemma stumbled backwards, fetching up against the wall of the lab - sandwiched, in fact, between it and the body of her soulmate.

Who was quite pleasingly solid, about eight inches taller than she, and currently yelling furiously in a language she didn't recognise at an object that *should* be inanimate but apparently wasn't.

The cloak settled down, now that it apparently had what it wanted, which was Stephen pressed firmly up against Jemma.

"I'm sorry about this," he apologised.

"I'm... not." Her hands had come up instinctively to protect herself, landed on his chest. The fabric of the clothing he wore under the cloak was softer and thinner than it looked, and she could feel the strong muscles beneath.

"Indeed?" Stephen's dark brows arched up, his thin lips curving in a very masculine smile. "Well... the Cloak does step in as it sees fit and has proved to be very helpful. On occasion," he added

The cloak fluttered in the invisible breeze again, and Jemma could have sworn she felt it pushing at Stephen's arms, shoving them against and around her.

"Yes, *thank you*, I think I got the message. And while I'm not at all averse to the idea, *consent* is apparently a concept I'm going to have to explain to you!"

"Hey," Jemma reached up to his face, took hold of his goatee between finger and thumb and tugged lightly. "Talk to me, not the cloak."

Stephen smiled sheepishly. "I don't even know your name."

"Jemma," she said. "Jemma Simmons."

"*Doctor* Jemma Simmons? But I've heard of you! I read your paper on the integration of artificial neural networks and the nervous system... it has some fascinating potential applications for prostheses!"

Jemma thought guiltily of Coulson's prosthesis, already far advanced of anything else in existence. Hearing that Stephen Strange knew who she was had her blushing, though. "I'd be happy to discuss the practical and theoretical applications with you sometime," she said.

She swore she heard a weird, high-pitched shriek of impatience in the back of her mind, an instant before Stephen's cloak swept up behind him and flipped over both their heads, pulling them closer together.

"I think it wants me to kiss you," Stephen said, his lips a scant inch from hers.

"I think so too."

“Do you mind?”

He sounded quite adorably awkward about it, Jemma thought. In the near-darkness underneath the cloak, she smiled.

“Not at all.”

***Chapter 58*: Switching Sides (Scott Lang/Jane Foster)**

“Jane!”

She’d never seen Tony Stark literally wild-eyed before. “What is it?” she asked, stepping forward as the doors to his swanky lab swished shut behind her. A second later her eye was caught by the equations streaming up the huge wall screen behind him. “Wait, what is *that*?”

“I don’t *know*!”

That was something she’d never heard him say, either. She’d rather thought what Tony Stark didn’t know and couldn’t figure out could probably fit on the back of a postage stamp, so to hear him almost wail his lack of understanding was, well, understandable. She couldn’t imagine he’d run across too many problems that stumped his towering intellect. The math streaming on the screens behind him was something else, though.

“This is quantum mechanics.” She took a step forward. “Pause it a moment? Or go to the beginning...”

“It’s quantum, I can’t figure out where the beginning *is*. Or *if* there is one,” Tony grumped, but he tapped a finger on the smaller virtual screen in front of him and the math stopped.

“Where the hell did you get this?” Jane asked after staring for a few minutes. “And what does Vision think?”

“Vision says it gave him a headache,” Tony said dryly, answering her second question first. “And I hacked it out of the controller of the ant-guy’s suit.”

“The one you put in the Raft?” Jane asked disapprovingly.

“The one who I allowed to escape from the Raft when Cap came for them,” Tony defended himself. “Yeah, that guy. His name’s Lang, Scott Lang; he’s a convicted felon from California.”

Jane turned around to give him raised eyebrows. “And the suit?”

“Good question. He’s got a master’s in engineering, but this...”

“This is way, way beyond that.” She looked back at the math and shook her head before sighing and squaring her shoulders. “Isn’t one suit enough for you, Tony?”

“I want to know how it works!”

“Of course you do.” She had to admit that she was curious herself. “All right. I’ll try and help you figure it out.”

Six months later

“You’re in, Scott,” Natasha’s calm voice said in his earpiece. “Clear to go large.”

One twist of the regulator and Scott was back to his normal size. Flicking back his face mask, he opened the top of his suit to reach inside and get the thumb drive Natasha and Hank had made for him. They had to stop Stark’s research into Hank Pym’s quantum math, and though Scott regretted the necessity of trashing whatever other research Stark was working on, he had no qualms about shoving the drive into the USB slot they’d determined he would need to physically access.

The problem was that there was a woman lying in front of it, her head on the desk, hair almost covering the port. She was sound asleep.

"There's someone here," Scott retreated a few steps and hissed into his comm.

"What? Who? Stark's in Johannesburg right now, T'Challa has eyes on him, and nobody is allowed into his labs when he's not present!" Natasha sounded absolutely shocked.

"It's a woman. Not Ms. Potts or Doctor Cho. Brown hair, tiny. Very beautiful." There was something familiar about her; Scott stole a couple of steps closer. "It's Doctor Foster," he realized.

There was a notebook on the desk next to Jane's right hand, a pen still held laxly in her fingers. Creeping closer still, a chill ran down Scott's spine as he recognized scribbled equations.

"Shit."

He'd spoken too loudly. Jane's eyes popped open. Seeing him standing over her, she opened her mouth to scream.

Scott moved fast, clapping his hand over her mouth. "Please don't," he said quickly. "You're messing with things you don't understand."

Jane's eyes widened even further and she went very still. Her hands, which had risen to grab at his wrists, froze in mid-air before she lowered them to the desk. She made a slight questioning noise.

"Are you going to scream if I let go?" She wasn't really reacting as Scott had expected.

Jane shook her head.

"That's good, because I really don't want to hurt you. I'm a big fan, actually. Love your work."

Her eyes crinkled at the corners, and Scott felt like she might actually be smiling against his hand. He lowered it from her mouth slowly. Yes, she was smiling, and damn if she wasn't even more beautiful when she smiled. He smiled back.

"Hi."

'Hi'? Did I seriously just say that oh my God, I'm such a dork.

Natasha was laughing her ass off in his earpiece, which really didn't help.

Jane pushed her rolling chair back, rose to her feet. She was even tinier than Scott had thought, the top of her head barely reaching his chin. He just stood there, staring down at her, wondering what the hell she was going to do next. She looked him up and down, slowly, her gaze pausing for a long moment on... *is she staring at my crotch? No, no, it's the regulator on my belt... oh.*

"You're the one who's been solving the equations," Scott said in sudden realization.

"Oh, shit," Natasha said in his ear.

"That's an understatement." Even if he did scramble Stark's data, Dr Foster was probably smart enough to reconstruct it all from her head. Especially if she had her notes. His eyes fell on the notebook on the desk.

"Don't you dare, that's mine!" Jane said, following the direction of his gaze.

Scott froze. "What did you say?" he asked numbly after a few seconds of tense silence.

She smiled again, took a small step closer. "I said, you're mine. Is that right?"

"Yes. Yes, I guess it is." That explained her strange reaction when he put his hand over her mouth and spoke. Scott stared down at her wonderingly.

Natasha coughed loudly in his earpiece, making him jump. *"Did I just listen in on a meeting of soulmates?"*

“Um, yes,” Scott said, still too stunned to take it in. Jane Foster was *his* soulmate. Beautiful, brilliant Jane Foster. “What the *hell* do I do now?” He wasn’t even really sure who he was speaking to. Natasha was talking to someone else, her voice hushed. Jane tilted her head as she gazed up at him.

“I’m assuming that you’re here because you’ve somehow become aware that Stark has solved at least part of the quantum equations he hacked out of your suit while you were in the Raft?” Jane said.

“You mean, *you* solved them, and they’re showing up in Stark tech,” Scott answered. “Yes.”

“And you need to stop him - and me - before we solve the rest.”

“Yes.” Despite having just woken from what Scott assumed was the sleep of pure exhaustion, she was incredibly astute. “Unless, of course, you’d like to switch sides?” he said hopefully.

“Given the choice between having all my work scrubbed and switching sides, you’re tempting me.” Jane gave him another long look up and down, and this time he was pretty sure that her eyes did pause on his crotch rather than the regulator. “You’re tempting me quite a lot. Will I get to keep working on the equations?”

“*Hank says bring her on board,*” Natasha said in his ear.

That was good, because Scott had already made up his mind. “Pick up your notebook,” he told Jane. “You’re being kidnapped.”

“How exciting.” Her eyes gleamed with amusement. “Do I get to shrink down to the size of an ant?”

“Not this time.” Sam was on his way in to pick her up; Natasha was in his ear giving him an ETA of two minutes. “How do you feel about flying?”

“You’re not talking about on a plane, are you?”

“Nope.” Picking her journal off the desk, he shoved it into her hands. “Don’t lose that, huh? I don’t want to have to break in here a second time looking for it.”

“Okay... please tell me you’re not doing what I think you’re doing!” Jane gasped, wide-eyed, as he pushed the USB drive into the access port.

“Me? Not doing anything. You never saw anything. You just got kidnapped.” And because she looked so beautifully indignant, he stole a quick kiss.

Well, he *was* a master thief, after all.

***Chapter 59*: I Haven't Killed Anyone... Yet (Daisy Johnson/J...**

Daisy never saw the tranq dart coming. If she had, it wouldn’t have hit her, of course; it would have been the easiest thing in the world to send out a quick vibration to deflect it. Once it hit her in the upper arm, though, she knew she was in trouble.

“Fuck!” For a moment she thought she’d been hit by a bullet, the impact knocked her sideways so hard, but she could see the dart sticking out of her arm. It had pierced right through the sleeve of her leather jacket. “Fuck, fuck...” she reached around to yank the dart out, already starting to feel a little woozy. Her vision hazed over as she looked up, trying to see who’d fired the shot.

The side door of a black van parked just a few yards further along the street opened, and two men jumped out, moving towards her. They looked wary, coming slowly, hands on weapons.

Daisy tried to lift her hands, but they felt incredibly heavy. She felt as though she was

trying to swim through molasses. “Bastards,” she slurred as the men came on quicker, looking more confident as she staggered sideways, unable to control her legs. “Jus’ wait until I wake up...”

A screech of tyres had her turning her head, blinking in an effort to clear her vision. Another van was approaching from her right, an older one, a real beater. And it zoomed past her to hit both the guys who were heading in her direction with malevolent intent.

It was the last thing Daisy saw before her consciousness gave out and she collapsed in a heap.

“Holy shit, Janey, you just ran over two guys!” Darcy shrieked.

“What are you doing?” Erik yelled at the same time.

“Thwarting a kidnapping. Quick, grab her before reinforcements come!” The front door of the black van was already swinging open.

“So we’re kidnapping her instead?” Darcy yelled, but she was already leaping out the van, accustomed to obeying Jane’s orders.

“Rescuing!” Jane yelled back. Erik gave her a cynical look, but he scrambled out to help Darcy and they quickly hauled the unconscious girl into the back of the van. Which was good, because the dude who’d just jumped out of the black van had a gun and he looked *pissed*. She slammed the stick into reverse and stomped on the gas, roaring back up the street with the rear door still flapping open.

Darcy shrieked. Erik grunted, but he also lunged forward to grab the doors and yank them shut as Jane spun the wheel and the van fishtailed.

“Bless Clint and his defensive driving training,” Jane muttered under her breath, looking in the rearview mirror at the rapidly receding image of the gunman, now stopping to check on his buddies. “How’s she doing, Darce?”

“Jane.” There was a note in Darcy’s voice she hadn’t heard in a long time. Not since Greenwich.

“What is it?” She didn’t dare turn her head to look, not at the speed they were traveling, but she did look in the mirror again, craning her neck to look into the back.

“It’s Quake.”

The van swerved as Jane momentarily lost control, but she got it back quickly enough. “You sure?”

“Her face has been all over the news. I’m sure. Um, Janey... that might not have been a kidnapping we just interrupted. It might have been an arrest.”

Too late to do much about that now, Jane thought. And she didn’t particularly like people who made arrests with tranquilliser darts, anyway.

“We know plenty of other people who are fugitives from the law, Darce.”

“Indeed we do.” Darcy obviously pulled out her phone, because the next thing she said was “Nat? Yeah, hi, we’ve got a little problem...”

Darcy was quite right to call in reinforcements, Jane knew, but a small part of her was hopeful Quake would wake up before they arrived. She kind of wanted to meet the woman who had the whole country in such a tizzy. From villain to hero and back again, Jane suspected that the public definitely weren’t getting the real story. The opportunity to hear it for herself wasn’t one she’d pass up.

So, when they got to the safe house Natasha directed them to, Jane volunteered to sit with

the unconscious woman while Darcy took first shower and Erik went to find some food. They'd been traveling all day and they were tired and hungry, so they both took her up on the offer eagerly.

Sitting beside the bed where they'd carried her - and Jane and Erik had carried her easily between them, she hardly weighed anything - Jane considered the unconscious woman's face. Barely more than a girl, really, she thought, the former Agent looked very young while asleep. Her lashes were long and pitch black, her brows delicately arched, and something about the tilt of her eye spoke of non-Caucasian genes not too far back in her family tree.

She was beautiful, no question about that. Even asleep, she held the eye, and Jane suspected that awake, with vitality infusing those stunning features, she would be the kind of woman you couldn't look away from.

Jane had no idea what tranquilliser Quake had been shot with, but from everything she knew, she'd expected consciousness to be slow in returning. So when dark brown eyes snapped open and Quake shot up to a sitting position between one breath and the next, Jane let out a scream of shock.

Startled, Daisy twisted towards the scream, her hands lifting instinctively, but she froze mid-gesture as she took in the slender brunette woman falling backwards off a chair.

No threat, her brain instantly assessed, and she lowered her hands and stared as the woman disentangled herself from the chair and scrambled clumsily to her feet.

Dressed in faded blue jeans, hiking boots, and a man's plaid shirt, the woman looked like no government agent Daisy had ever seen. Nor did she look like a 'bad guy' ... they tended to wear a lot of black and leather and the women usually wore a lot of makeup, which this woman certainly wasn't. Daisy didn't even think she was wearing lip gloss. Not that the lack of makeup detracted from her beauty in any way; she was one of the most naturally stunning women Daisy had even seen, even dusty from her crash to the floor with her hair all over the place.

"You made me jump!" the woman cried, and Daisy, mouth open to ask just where the hell she was and who the woman was, froze without getting a sound out.

"You're quite safe, I promise!" the woman said earnestly, her eyes wide and sincere. "I ran over the guys who were trying to kidnap you."

"You *ran over* them?" Daisy gaped.

A shriek of delight was her answer. "You have *no idea* how many people I've run over trying to find you!"

Daisy had to laugh as her soulmate plopped herself down on the end of the bed, grinning broadly. "How are you still allowed to drive?"

"Oh, pshaw," a slender hand was wagged at her. "I haven't killed anyone. Yet. I think. I'm Jane, by the way. Jane Foster, and I already know you're Daisy Johnson. Assuming that's your real name and not an alias?"

"It's my real name... wait, *the* Jane Foster? *Doctor* Jane Foster, Nobel Prize winner?"

"You've heard of me!" Jane looked delighted.

"Yes... is this one of your alternate realities I've fallen into?"

"That's not how Einstein-Rosen Bridges work," Jane shook her head. "This is the same reality where you were shot with a tranq dart and nearly kidnapped off the street. Pure chance that it was the same street I was driving down at the time."

"... My head hurts."

“Well, it’s not surprising after you were tranked!” Jane looked sympathetic. “Darcy might have some Advil in her bag, or I can get her to search for some. She’s just in the shower and Erik went to get some food. We’re in a safe house.”

“Whose safe house?” Daisy looked up, attention arrested.

“Mine,” a cold voice said from by the door, and both of them looked around to see Natasha there, a gun in either hand, both pointed at Daisy.

Jane acted on pure instinct, throwing herself across Daisy with a shriek. “No! Don’t shoot her, she’s my soulmate!”

“Oof,” Daisy said from underneath her, knocked flat by the impact. “Um. I’m really not in any danger from bullets, Jane.”

“Oh,” feeling thoroughly foolish, Jane scrambled backward. Natasha was chuckling, lowering her guns slightly, though she didn’t put them away.

“She’s really your soulmate?” she asked Jane.

“Yes, and I’m no threat to you,” Daisy claimed. “I didn’t kill Director Mace, either. The footage was... well, not faked exactly, but it wasn’t me.”

“A face veil?” Natasha asked.

“Something like that. I had to leave SHIELD to protect the agency, though they know I didn’t do it either. They need to rebuild without me as a shadow hanging over them.”

Natasha studied her for a long moment and then seemed to come to a decision, holstering her guns. “Well,” she said with a small smile, “let’s find out.”

Another woman stepped into the room beside Natasha, small and slight in a long red leather coat, brown hair falling almost to her waist. The Scarlet Witch smiled.

“Hello, Daisy,” she said in accented English. “I’ve been just dying to meet you.”

***Chapter 60*: A Knight In Black Kevlar Body Armor (Hunter/Jan...**

“Coulson,” Jane whispered into her phone, “how long exactly do you want me to hide in here? This is a really, really small cupboard.”

“Exactly.” Coulson sounded completely unruffled at the other end of the line. “The guys looking for you won’t believe that a fully grown adult woman could possibly fit in it.”

“Coulson!”

“Shouldn’t be much longer now, Dr Foster. My man should be there any minute.”

“*One* man? There’s at least six out there!” she hissed.

“I assure you, he’s quite competent to deal with it.”

“One of your Inhumans, then?”

“No...”

If Jane had been able to curl up any smaller, she’d have done it right then as a deafening explosion outside rocked her trailer.

“That sounds like him now,” Coulson said in cheerful tones. “I’ll let him know where to find you once he’s dealt with the opposition.”

And to Jane’s utter horror, the phone went dead. “Coulson!” she hissed helplessly. She couldn’t even get her phone in front of her face to see the redial button, she was crammed into the cupboard so tightly. She just had to stay there and listen to the explosions and the chatter of gunfire until everything finally went quiet.

Too quiet.

Don't move, Jane. Coulson might have been confident, but one man against six or more was certainly not a guaranteed outcome. Coulson's man might be dead and the others might be looking for her even now.

"Coulson, I can't find her," an exasperated voice with a strong English accent said suddenly, quite close by. She breathed a sigh of relief before realizing that she'd have to wait for him to find her. She couldn't even move far enough to push the cupboard door open.

"She can't be. You couldn't fit a cat in that cupboard!"

"I'm not a cat," Jane said loudly.

The silence almost rang with shock, and then the cupboard door was snatched open and she found herself staring into a pair of chocolate-brown eyes in a lean, handsome face.

"Hi." She wiggled the fingers of one hand in a mini-wave. "I think I might be stuck." She should have asked Coulson what the guy's name was, it occurred to her. "I'm Jane."

He stared at her, his eyes wide with shock. "How did you even get *in* there?"

"It's surprising what you can do when you're motivated by sheer panic." Jane accepted his hand and started working her way out of the cupboard. She wasn't even sure how she *had* got in there, to be honest, but when Coulson called and told her to jump up on the counter and get in the cupboard above the microwave because it was the only viable place to hide from the men who would be on her in two minutes, she'd done it without even thinking.

Only now, getting *out* was quite a lot trickier than getting *in* had been, she discovered, since her legs had completely cramped up from being hunched unmoving for twenty minutes, and her arms weren't much better. She finally toppled ungracefully out and landed in her rescuer's arms.

"Also," Jane looked up into his eyes hopefully, "I've spent my life checking out interesting hidey-holes in the hope that one day my soulmate would ask me how I got in there."

Sexy Brown Eyes smiled back at her, showing an unexpected dimple in his cheek. "I've been calling women *kitty* for the longest time, too. Got me slapped a fair few times."

She burst out laughing, and since he didn't seem to be in any hurry to set her down, slipped her arms around his neck. "No slaps, I promise."

"Good to know." He was staring at her in apparent fascination, making her feel a bit bashful. She ducked her head and peeked at him through her lashes.

"Um. Coulson didn't mention your name."

"Oh!" He blinked, grinned. "Hunter. Lance Hunter, but everyone just calls me Hunter."

"Lance?" She latched onto that, of course. "Lancelot?"

"Regrettably." His dimple flashed again. "Please don't hold it against me."

She'd like to hold quite a lot of things against him, actually, starting with her mouth and working down from there. "I think it's very appropriate. My knight in... black kevlar body armor."

Hunter's smile broadened even further. "Any time, my lady. Any time."

It seemed like an entirely appropriate moment to thank him with a kiss.

***Chapter 61*: A Touch Of Magic (Stephen Strange/Jane Foster)**

"Wait." Jane blinked incredulously at Tony. "*What?*"

Tony spread his hands helplessly. "He says it's magic. Some kind of Zen thing he learned in Tibet. It's clearly teleportation and it looks vaguely like that sort of blue rainbow bridge thing

Thor does... if you could only see one end of it. A blue swirly circle he steps through and the other end is Somewhere Else.”

“But what machinery does he use? What apparatus?” Pushing back from her computer, Jane rose to her feet, brow furrowed as she tried to understand what Tony was saying. “Is it at the starting location, or the end point?”

“Neither. There’s no machinery. Just some fancy double-finger ring he wears and then he makes this swirly hand motion and...” Tony gestured again.

“That’s *not possible*.”

Tony’s expression was absolutely pathetic. “I *know*.”

If Tony Stark had no idea how something worked, if the science was utterly beyond him, then Jane didn’t see how she could possibly begin to understand either. But then, this was *her* particular area of expertise. Maybe she could see something Tony had missed.

“Can I meet this guy?”

“He’s keen to meet you, actually. Said he’d read all your papers and you were doing some interesting math.”

“*Interesting* math, my ass,” Jane muttered once she’d hung up the phone. “Bet he didn’t even understand it!”

“I did, actually,” a deep voice said behind her, making her leap to her feet and spin around, shrieking with surprise. “I beg your pardon. Didn’t mean to make you jump.”

Stephen Strange was the archetypal tall, dark and handsome, wings of white in his black hair giving him a distinguished, patrician look. At any other time he’d have held Jane’s entire attention, especially considering not only his extremely intriguing outfit topped off with a swirling scarlet cloak *and* the fact that he’d just said her soulmate words, but right now she was too busy staring at the circle of swirling blue light just behind him, and the view of a room filled with strange artifacts on the other side of it.

Finally, she managed to draw her gaze to his, saw that his eyes were the same clear, sparkling blue as the gateway.

“You,” she said, “are going to have to fucking well *explain*.”

Strange’s eyebrows shot up. “I... should be very glad to explain anything you wish to the best of my ability, Dr. Foster,” he said finally. “I am Dr Stephen Strange, and if you would care to pay a visit to my sanctum, we could sit down and talk for as long as you wish.” He gestured behind him at the gateway.

There were any number of intriguing-looking things on the other side of that gateway, so she took a step forward. “You’ll bring me back any time I want?” she checked.

“Of course.” He crooked his arm gallantly, and she put her hand on it, having to tip her head way back to look up at him.

“What *is* it with me and extremely tall men in red cloaks?”

The corners of his mouth twitched up, and she decided he had a sense of humor. Which was good.

“Fate, perhaps? Though I understood you and Prince Thor were no longer, ah...”

“Dating? Yeah. It wasn’t that much of a thing... I knew my soulmate would turn up eventually and he found his in Helen Cho, another scientist who works with the Avengers. I’m babbling, aren’t I?”

“Maybe a little bit. It’s fine. You won’t feel anything.” He was leading her towards the gateway.

Jane eyed it apprehensively. “That’s what Thor said about the Bifrost but the first time I traveled it conscious, I pretty much threw up my toenails... oh.” They’d stepped through the gateway and she had literally felt nothing at all. “That... was unexpected.” She turned to look behind her, half-expecting to see nothing there, but the gateway was still there on this side, her lab on the other looking just as always.

“I do not pretend to know how the Bifrost works,” Stephen said in his mellifluous voice, “but I don’t think astral gateways are the same thing.” He held out his hand and made a spiralling sort of gesture, and the gateway obediently spiralled down to a pinpoint and winked out.

Jane found herself staring at a glass display case with a large book on a lectern enclosed in it. The book appeared to be chained shut as well as chained to the lectern. She blinked.

“Someone’s been watching too much *Harry Potter*.”

“Trust me, that book is a lot more dangerous than anything Ms. Rowling could have dreamed up even in her fertile imagination,” Stephen said darkly. “Some magics are too dangerous to be used.” He led her away from the case and through a doorway into another room, still wood-panelled and filled with antiques, but these looked rather less... *eldritch* was the only word that came to mind.

“Please, have a seat.” Stephen gestured towards an overstuffed green leather armchair. “Tea?”

“Um, thanks, yes,” she said, looking around her with interest. There was a tea service on the table in between the two armchairs, she noted as she sat down, two clean cups at the ready. And then her eyeballs nearly fell out of her head as Stephen pointed at one of the cups and *it filled up with tea*.

“*What the actual fuck.*”

Stephen smiled, not unsympathetically, as he took the seat opposite and pointed at his own teacup to fill it. “I could make it the other way, of course. But I find this is usually the fastest way to head off protestations about magic not being real. Or about it being *science we just don’t understand yet*. I used to be a neurosurgeon, Dr Foster; please believe me that I was once more cynical about magic than anyone.”

Gingerly, Jane picked up the teacup. The tea inside was steaming gently.

“Oh, sorry... would you like milk or lemon? Sugar?”

“Two sugars, please,” she said dazedly, and two sugar lumps flew up from the bowl on the table and dropped lightly into her cup, making twin tiny splashes, before *stirring themselves in to dissolve*.

“Okay,” she said slowly, staring into the cup. “I won’t hit you with the line about magic being science we just don’t understand yet.” Looking back up, she met his gaze. “After all, nobody’s been able to explain how soulmate marks work, and we’ve been researching that for a very long time.”

“That’s very true,” Stephen nodded. Only then did she notice that his cloak - which wasn’t really all that much like Thor’s, after all - was floating in mid-air behind his chair, still draped as though resting over his shoulders. Which were quite nicely broad, she found herself noticing. He was unwrapping the dark blue jacket he wore, pulling it off to reveal a plain cotton undershirt beneath, and then pulling up his sleeve to show her cramped scrawl printed neatly over the outside of his right bicep.

“Oh.” She blushed. She hadn’t been too sure where his mark would be, had imagined all sorts of possibilities over the years. On his bicep was positively tame compared to most of the

options.

“Where’s mine?” he asked, and she held out her left hand in answer, showing him the precise script which had been there since her birth. *I beg your pardon. Didn’t mean to make you jump.*

“At least I always knew you had nice manners,” Jane said.

“As I always knew that either you had a chronic potty mouth, or I’d have done something beyond the pale at our first meeting,” Stephen said with a full-on grin this time, and she winced.

“Just how old were you when the F-word appeared on your arm?”

“Three.”

“... oops?”

“It’s fine. I’ve had plenty of time to get used to it, and it was always easily enough hidden.” He took her hand in his, tracing the tip of his finger lightly over the words, and she shivered a little with reaction, her lips parting.

“That,” Stephen said softly, and she looked up from their hands touching to meet his blue eyes.

“Huh?” Jane said eloquently.

“That. That’s a little bit of real magic, what you just felt there. Most people can’t even feel that much, even though the soulmate mark is a tiny bit of magic a lot of us possess. You, though, you *felt* that.”

“I felt you touching my hand,” Jane tried to disclaim. “My soulmate, touching my skin for the first time, it’s a natural reaction...”

His eyes were too knowing.

“I felt *something*,” she admitted finally.

“I was pretty sure my soulmate might have more than a touch of magic in her.” He smiled. “I promise I’ll be gentler in teaching you to use it than my teacher was with me.”

“Somehow, I’m not comforted.”

“Hey, I’ve got a huge advantage. At least you’re not dismissing magic out of hand.”

“Hard to dismiss the fact that I’m not in Puente Antiguo any more,” she looked around the room with a smile. “Or how good your magic tea tastes.”

He laughed delightedly. “Not much fazes you, does it?”

“I was possessed by an Infinity Stone and had to fight Dark Elves to save London,” Jane said with a wry grin, “and that was *after* Thor and Loki had a showdown outside my lab.”

“Yes,” his grin faded, and he raised his hand to touch his chest unconsciously. Jane had the feeling that he was reaching for something that wasn’t there... a necklace, perhaps? “That’s why I wanted to meet you, actually. The Infinity Stone... the Aether.”

Jane shivered with remembered pain. “The Asgardians took it,” she said quickly. “They were taking it to a safe place, they said.”

Stephen nodded. “Yes, Stark said that. I wanted to ask you what it was like when you wielded it, though.”

“I think... *it* wielded *me*. Why do you want to know?”

“Because I have another one of the Infinity Gems, and I had some questions for the only other living human I know to have come into physical contact with one.”

Jane’s jaw dropped. “You *have* one?” Instinctively, she was trying to move away, she dimly recognized, shrinking back in her chair. “*Which* one?”

“The Eye of Agamotto. It’s an ancient relic which was made by the first Sorcerer

Supreme to contain and channel the power of the Time Stone. And no, I have no idea how he came by it, or even how long ago. A later sorcerer studied it and wrote a grimoire about it, which I used to figure out how to use it.”

“You already *used* it?” Her voice was coming out high and panicked. Stephen made a calming gesture.

“It’s quite safe. I’ve read the grimoire very carefully since then and the Eye of Agamotto isn’t just a pretty necklace with the Stone set into it, it’s a magical artefact in its own right which protects the user from the worst effects. Much as the scepter Loki had protected him from the Soul Stone, until it ended up stuck in Vision’s forehead.”

The shocks were coming a bit too thick and fast for Jane. “That one’s an Infinity Stone as well?” she said weakly.

“Indeed, though it seems not even he knew what it was. I recognized it from my studies of the Stones. I believe the fact that three of the Stones were all on Earth at the same time may be... significant.”

“Twice,” Jane said numbly. “There were three of them here *twice*. The Tesseract is one too, and it was here at the same time as Loki’s scepter and your eye thing.”

“The Tesseract,” Stephen said, “of course, I never thought of that.” He stood and began to pace. “It was here for a long time, was it not? Maybe... having both the Tesseract and the Eye on Earth at the same time for so long has affected the others somehow... maybe it’s drawing them here...”

“I seriously hope not!”

He stopped pacing and looked at her. Jane sighed and got to her feet, pushing her hair back from her face.

“Sounds like we’ve got some research to do, huh?” The mere thought of the Aether might give her shivers, but that was all the more reason to help Stephen figure out if there really was something to his theory that the other stones were being drawn to Earth somehow. They’d need to know what to expect.

“You don’t have to.” His expression was serious as he looked down at her. “You’ve answered my question about the Aether well enough - because it doesn’t have an artefact like the Eye of Agamotto to contain and channel it, it isn’t safe to use.”

“Which means that we need to figure out how to make something to do just that,” Jane said practically. “And the Tesseract, too. And whatever other Stones there are out there. Where do we start?”

He smiled and held his hand out to her. “The library at Kammar-Taj.”

“And where’s that?”

Stephen’s cloak flew across the room to settle about his shoulders as she accepted his hand, and he lifted the other to shape a circle in the air with it.

“Tibet. I can’t wait for you to meet Wong.”

***Chapter 62*: The Ladies of Science! (Jane Foster/Helen Cho)**

“So this entire floor of this wing is yours,” Tony Stark said expansively, waving his hand around to indicate the laboratory that was even more state-of-the-art than the one Ultron had destroyed in Seoul. Helen Cho looked around silently, taking everything in.

“Who else is in this wing?” she asked finally. “This is the middle floor of three.”

“Well, downstairs is the lab I had set up for Bruce, if... *when* he comes back.” Tony looked down for a moment before taking a deep breath and squaring his shoulders. “And upstairs is Doctor Jane Foster, the astrophysicist. She needs to top floor for the roof access for her telescopes... she mostly works at night though, for obvious reasons. I doubt you’ll cross paths with her much.”

Helen nodded. For all intents and purposes, then, she and her assistants would mostly have the building to themselves, which suited her just fine. Other people were a distraction she didn’t need. Stark didn’t seem to get that, talking away at her until she eventually tired of him and said “Go away. I need to work.”

He knew her well enough not to take offence. He just chuckled and left her alone, no doubt heading off to go annoy somebody else with his particular brand of genius and aggravating attitude, and Helen settled in to work in peace.

She got a full three days of uninterrupted work in before her first casualty arrived; Sam hadn’t quite got the hang of flying with other people yet and he and Vision had a mid-air collision. Vision’s vibranium-laced skin was impervious to pretty much everything, so Sam got the worst of it. Helen had to patch up several deep lacerations.

She was a little surprised when a pretty, bosomy dark-haired girl came rushing in towards the end of the procedure, throwing herself on Sam and sobbing on his neck.

“Just a moment, please, Miss, ah...”

“Darcy,” Sam said, grinning and hugging the girl close. “This is Darcy Lewis, Doc, she’s my soulmate. Angel, I’m fine, I promise,” he reassured.

“Not quite, but you will be soon. Though if your soulmate keeps hugging you like that, you may end up more closely bonded than you intended.” Helen gestured to where Darcy’s hand was pressed against Sam’s stomach. “That skin is still forming. You’ll be stuck together in a minute and it’ll hurt a great deal if I have to separate you.”

“Yikes!” Darcy pulled off quickly, checked her hand. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Helen checked the calibration on her portable regeneration machine. “Five more minutes, Sam.”

“You got it, Doc.”

Helen watched as Sam and Darcy practically devoured each other with their eyes, unable to touch. Absently, she rubbed at her own soulmark, located on her ribs just below her left breast. She’d never thought all that much about her soulmate, though she’d driven herself to learn perfect English because unlike all her friends growing up, her words were in that language instead of Korean. She supposed that living in the United States now made it more likely that she’d find her soulmate soon.

“You must be Helen.” Unable to touch Sam, Darcy turned her attention elsewhere briefly. “Oh, I’m sorry, Doctor Cho...”

“Helen is fine.” She gave the younger woman a warm smile.

“Oh, thanks... I’m Darcy. We’ve been here for a week but Jane’s kept us so busy unpacking and setting up all her gear, we haven’t had a chance to come down and introduce ourselves.”

Darcy’s smile was contagious, Helen thought, finding herself smiling back as she shook hands.

“Well, it’s nice to finally meet you, Darcy. I didn’t know Sam’s soulmate worked here too.”

"I didn't, but I do now." Darcy sneaked another look at Sam, and Helen checked the clock on the wall.

"It's okay. You can touch now." She watched with a small smile as Darcy flew into Sam's arms again, clinging to him. The expression of bliss on both their faces made her heart ache a little.

Maybe she'd start trying a bit harder to look for her soulmate. Being social and friendly had never come easily to her, though she'd tried for the sake of the words. The last party she'd been to, she fell asleep in the middle and then Ultron trashed the place, which would have put a downer on anyone's desire to attend parties.

"This looks like a fun party, can I come in?" a light voice said behind her, and Helen turned with her mouth agape, unable to believe what had just happened. It wasn't possible to summon one's soulmate just by thinking about them...

A waifish brunette woman smiled at her before stepping around and heading for the bed, leaning over to hug Darcy and Sam both.

"Don't you dare pull a stunt like that again, flyboy," she said in a severe tone. "I haven't been able to get a minute's work out of Darcy since we heard you were hurt."

Helen frowned, thinking that sounded very unsympathetic, but Sam was laughing, obviously taking the woman's words as a joke, and hugging her back.

"I'm fine, Janey, really. Thanks to the miracle worker here, Doctor Cho."

Jane Foster - for it was the Nobel laureate, Helen realised - let go of Sam and turned around, smiling at her. "Not the first miracle you've performed, I hear, Doctor. Thank you so much."

"You're welcome," Helen said inanely, before mentally kicking herself. Even if they were Jane's soulmate words, the poor woman probably heard them all the time. "Er... could I have a private word, Doctor Foster?"

"Jane, please," Jane insisted, following Helen into her office. "I understand we're lab neighbours now."

"Yes, and, uh, call me Helen." She shook hands, feeling the strength, the work calluses, on Jane's slender fingers. "I was, just, um." *Why can't I find words? ARGH!*

Jane tipped her head slightly, smiling. "Is there something I can help you with, Helen?"

"Does your soulmark say *you're welcome*?" she blurted out.

Jane's lips parted with a gasp before a delighted smile dawned. "Yes! Yes, it does!" Grabbing at her plaid shirt, she rolled the sleeve up to show the two words printed in Helen's tiny, precise script on the inside of her left elbow.

To reciprocate, Helen had to shrug out of her lab coat and pull her blouse right up at the back. Jane leaned in to read the words just under her bra strap, and then her fingers ghosted over them very lightly.

"I've been hoping that what I said would be distinctive enough my soulmate would know," she said, her eyes welling with tears. "I've gotten my hopes up so many times..."

"To be honest, I expected to meet you at a party," Helen said, letting her blouse drop and reaching out in a tentative gesture. Jane almost threw herself into Helen's arms and hugged on tight. "But I'm so glad I found you here... where we don't have to be polite in front of other people."

Apparently Jane fully agreed, because a moment later her lips met Helen's in a very satisfying gesture... and ten minutes later, Helen was very glad her office was locked and

soundproof.

***Chapter 63*: Hot Damn (Clint/Bucky/Jane)**

Jane habitually ignored her phone when it rang. Darcy always picked it up, but today she wasn't, and the annoying ring just wouldn't stop. It had been ringing for two minutes straight when Jane finally remembered she'd given Darcy the evening off.

"Damn it, go away," she told the phone, not looking away from her computer screen. Which promptly went blank before coming up with a Skype window. "What the fuck, I don't even have Skype installed..."

"You do now," Tony Stark said irritably. "Why don't you pick up the damn phone?"

"Because it's always people I don't want to talk to." Jane gave him arched eyebrows and attempted to click on the button to close the window. It wouldn't click.

"This isn't a social call. We've had an alert that there's an imminent threat!"

"To what?"

"To *you*!" Tony looked as though he was just about at the end of his tether. "Jane, will you *please* pay attention?"

"What sort of threat?" She realized Tony was looking past her with an expression of horror on his face, swivelled around. "Oh. Shit."

"Help is on its way!" Tony yelled as the four masked men all in black strode towards her. "Don't..."

She'd never know what he didn't want her to do, because one of the guns spat fire and the monitor shattered into a million fizzling pieces.

"Hey, that was mine!" she yelled, jumping to her feet before it occurred to her that making sudden moves might not be in her best interests. About two seconds later a bag was thrown over her head and strong hands grabbed her arms, zip-tying her hands together behind her back.

"I'm totally going to throw up if you shove me in a vehicle and drive anywhere with this bag over my head," she said through the stifling fabric as they dragged her out of the lab. "Especially since it's really freaking hot."

There was a strange hissing noise by her left ear, and then something wet splattered against the bag on the right side of her face. The hands holding her arms slackened and fell away.

Jane stood there in the silence, sun beating down on the bag on her head.

"Um," she said after about half a minute. "Hello?"

Nobody answered. She tilted her head left, then right, trying to hear something, or see anything past the lower edge of the bag, but there was no sound at all and she could see nothing but blackness.

"Help?" she tried. When there was no answer, she tried it a little louder. "HELP!!!"

"Hang on!" a voice yelled, and she froze. Could that possibly be...

She could hear booted feet now, pounding on the hard ground as someone ran fast towards her. Maybe... two someones? She'd never relied much on her hearing, but she strained her ears now. The booted footsteps were coming closer.

"Help," she said rather pathetically again.

"We've got you. You're safe," a deep voice said gruffly, and a moment later strong hands caught at her wrists, there was a momentary sensation of cold steel, and the tight cable tie fell away. Jane reached up to pull the bag off her head, but other hands were already there removing

it. She blinked against the harsh sunlight, and two men came slowly into focus.

“Are you all right, doc?” one of them said. He had short sandy hair, a lived-in sort of face and eyes somewhere between green and blue. The tip of a bow poked up over one shoulder. Jane gawped from him to her other savior, whose longish black hair framed a pale, stubbled face with ice blue eyes and knife-sharp cheekbones.

“You’ve got blood on your face,” the Winter Soldier said gruffly. “Let’s get you inside and you can wash up.”

She made the mistake of looking down then, and swayed at the sight of the four dead bodies. Two of them had arrows stuck through their heads, the other two... didn’t have much head left. Well, a high-velocity round from a sniper rifle would do that, she supposed. *That’s physics in action for you.* Realising then what the hot liquid which had splattered the side of the bag must have been, Jane said weakly;

“I think I’m gonna throw up.”

“Get her out of here, I’ll clean up,” the Soldier said curtly, and Hawkeye’s strong arm went around Jane, turning her around and steering her back towards her lab. She didn’t make it before she bent at the waist and emptied her stomach.

A gentle hand scooped her hair back, holding it away from her face, and she leaned against his strength feebly.

“Done now?”

Jane nodded, and to her surprise Hawkeye’s arms went around her and he picked her up, bridal style, to carry her inside. Looking around, he obviously spotted the open bathroom door and carried her inside, setting her on the small vanity and picking up a towel. Wetting it under the tap, he wiped at her face gently.

“Are you okay? I’m sorry you had to see that. Buck’ll clean everything up, don’t worry.”

“Buck?”

“Bucky... Barnes. Do you not know who we are?” His brows furrowed quite adorably, Jane thought.

“Hawkeye and the Winter Soldier,” she replied, in a *Duh!* tone.

“Also known as Clint and Bucky. Did Stark not reach you to tell you we were on our way and to hide until we got here?”

She glanced guiltily past him at the shattered computer monitor, shook her head.

“Well, as far as we know it was just those four, but we need you to come back to headquarters with us for a few days anyway, just until we can make sure the threat has passed. Do you want to grab a few things?”

He followed her to her trailer, where she just stood and stared around despairingly for a few moments before turning around.

“I only really need my notebook and to lock up the lab. I’ve been to the Tower before and Tony had a whole suite full of clothes and stuff for me... way nicer than anything of mine.”

“We’re not at the Tower anymore, we’re at a facility upstate, but yes, there is a suite with your name on it, I believe. I think Stark’s still hoping to persuade you to come and work with us, even after you and Thor, ah, broke up.”

“Thor has nothing to do with why I don’t want to work for Stark. He’s bossy and controlling and there’s too much light in New York City anyway. Upstate, did you say?”

“Way up near the Canadian border. I believe he’s found an old mine shaft nearby and fitted up an astronomy lab at the bottom of it for you.” Clint smiled at her. He had a very, very

nice smile.

“I don’t suppose your soulmark says *help*?” she asked before she could stop herself.

Clint froze. “Actually it says it twice,” he said in a disbelieving tone. “And... yours? Do you...?”

“Have two?” She was hoping against hope. “One of them says *hang on* and the other says *we’ve got you, you’re safe*.”

“I shouted *hang on* while we were running to get to you.” Clint’s eyes warmed. “And I’m pretty sure Bucky shouted the other thing. We’ve been looking for you for a while, Jane.”

“I can imagine people shout *help* at you quite a lot.”

“We were both afraid that we wouldn’t be able to. Help, that is.” His hand reached for hers, squeezed it lightly. “I’m really glad we did.”

“Glad we did what?” Bucky loomed inside the door.

“Rescue our soulmate,” Clint said with a broad grin at him, and Bucky’s eyes widened slightly before a grin split his face.

“Hot *damn*,” he said, and Jane laughed.

“That’s pretty much what I was thinking.” Cheekily, she squeezed the thick swell of Clint’s biceps. “That, and I owe Tony Stark big-time.”

“For sending us?” Clint asked.

“Well, that, but also for designing you sleeveless combat uniforms with really tight pants!”

***Chapter 64*: Star-Crossed Lovers (Jane Foster/Brock Rumlow)**

“Go away,” Jane said absently as she heard the lab doors slide open behind her, “unless you’ve brought me more coffee.”

“I wouldn’t dare enter your lab without it,” Tony’s voice star laughingly, and she grinned.

“Excellent, just put it there.” She tilted her head towards a small clear spot on her desk without taking her eyes off what she was doing.

“Uh, I brought our newest Avenger in to say hi. This is Brock Rumlow, aka Crossbones.”

That was interesting enough that she looked away from her screen briefly, said “Hi” and then paused, because she wasn’t quite sure what she’d expected, but Rumlow wasn’t it. He was older than the youthful Avengers who’d been joining up lately, probably about Stark’s age, with black hair, knife-edged cheekbones, lots of dark stubble and faint creases at the corners of laughing whisky-colored eyes.

She was staring, and Rumlow smiled, a slow smile that made the wrinkles around his eyes a little deeper but didn’t do any damage to his good looks.

A sharp whine behind her made Jane suddenly remember why she hadn’t wanted to be interrupted in the first place, and she whipped back around. “Oh sh-” was all she got out before the machine exploded.

Tony had spotted it coming and dived behind a desk, but Jane was way too close to the machine. Brock took one huge stride forward, grabbed her around the waist and spun back around, throwing them both to the ground and hoping he wouldn’t take too much shrapnel in the back. He’d heal, but it’d still hurt like a son of a bitch.

Jane’s scream was lost in the *boom*. Tiny bits of metal pattered down all around them and an alarm started ringing, moments before overhead sprinklers came on.

“Oh my god, are you all right?” Tiny hands were patting at his cheeks. “Please say you’re all right, please don’t tell me I just killed a brand new Avenger!”

He’d closed his eyes instinctively, opened them now to gaze down at the small scientist, realizing his weight must be crushing her. “Are *you* all right?” he grated out, ignoring the distant sensations of pain in his back and down the back of his legs. He was bleeding from a dozen small wounds but he could already feel his enhanced body working to reject the metal shrapnel, knit muscle and skin back together. His jacket and pants were ruined but that was a small price to pay for Jane Foster’s life.

Her eyes were very wide and soft as she gazed at him, from a distance of just a few inches away.

“I... I’m fine,” she said in a thready whisper.

“I’m crushing you.” He glanced behind him, saw that the fire was already out. The sprinklers stopped just then and Stark stood up, swearing a blue streak and tapping at his earpiece, snapping orders to FRIDAY.

Standing up, Brock lifted Jane with him, setting her on her feet gently. She swayed and he left his arm around her, moving her gently away from the wrecked machinery. “Are you sure you’re okay? Are you bleeding anywhere? Did you hit your head when I threw you down?” He’d flung one hand behind her head, trying to shield her, but his hand had smashed pretty hard on the floor. She could be concussed. She was gazing up at him through dreamy eyes, her lips slightly parted, and it crossed his mind suddenly that he really, really wanted to kiss her.

“Let’s get you out of here,” he said, catching Stark’s eye. Tony nodded at him and Brock guided Jane towards the doors.

“My work...”

“Let Stark deal with the mess. You can come back and check things later. Right now let’s get you checked out in medical, hey?” He was glad Stark had shown him those facilities already; he knew exactly which floor to punch in the elevator.

“I’m not hurt,” Jane claimed, though she didn’t pull away from his supportive arm.

Brock gave her a comprehensive look up and down. She seemed okay, but he figured it wouldn’t hurt to let Dr Cho check her over. “Humor me,” he said. “It’s not every day I get to rescue beautiful lady scientists from their exploding labs.”

She actually coloured a little at that, looking down at her feet, and then up again as the doors slid open. Brock guided her gently out and into the medical suite, where Dr Cho was obviously already awaiting them, because she came hurrying over immediately.

“Jane! My goodness, let me look at you...”

“I’m fine,” Jane insisted, finally stepping away from Brock. “Crossbones here saved me, threw me down and shielded me... wait. Are *you* injured?” Turning to look at him, her eyes widened at the blood trail from the elevator doors to where Brock’s booted feet stood on the tile floor. “Oh my god. You’re bleeding!”

Helen let out a cry of horror, and then both women were tugging at his arms, half-dragging him over to a medical couch despite his protests that it was quite unnecessary. He could hardly throw them aside, though, so he submitted with bad grace to being made to lie down on his stomach.

“I’d really rather you didn’t,” he said as Helen came up with a large pair of scissors, but she ignored him completely and started cutting up the back of his jacket.

“Rumlow, you have a hole in the back of this jacket as long as my hand,” Helen said

firmly. "And considering the amount of blood you've just left all over the floor of my formerly sterile treatment room, I believe I'm justified in my concern even if you do have super-healing!"

"You do?" Jane said. She was holding his hand, Brock was surprised to discover.

"Yeah." He winced as Helen's gloved hands probed at his back. "I was used as one of Hydra's guinea-pigs."

"I'm so sorry," Jane said softly, and he grunted.

"Don't be. I volunteered. Director Fury tasked me to infiltrate Hydra's deepest undercover cells and entering their enhancement program was the only way in."

"Still. I've heard some things about what they did to people. Wanda talked to me." She squeezed his hand again, and he was grateful for it as Helen clamped some forceps on and removed the biggest piece of shrapnel from his back.

"Fffuccckkk," he hissed out, trying not to crush Jane's fingers.

"Easy," she whispered. "Helen, wouldn't a local anaesthetic be a good idea?"

"Wouldn't do anything," Helen said crisply, dropping the shrapnel into a kidney dish with a clatter. "I've already been through his chart. He's got the same metabolic issues as Rogers and Barnes; drugs are processed too fast to have any effect. I could give him enough ketamine to kill ten horses and he'd probably be a bit woozy for a minute or two. Isn't that right, Mr Rumlow?"

"Unfortunately." He gritted his teeth. Another metal shard clinked.

"Looks like a couple on your butt as well, I'm afraid." Cool metal touched his skin and her shears cut away his pants and shorts, leaving him bare-ass naked apart from his boots. He heard Jane's indrawn breath and looked up at her, finding her staring at his ass with wide eyes.

"Enjoyin' the view?" he husked out as Helen poked her tweezers into his left buttock.

"It's... a great view." A blush rose up on Jane's cheek, but then she looked back to meet his eyes. "But I wasn't *just* appreciating that. I was looking at your soulmark."

"Eh." He closed his eyes. "It's as generic as you can get. I might have met her twenty years ago and never known." Two letters on his right buttock, a single word so generic he'd long stopped hoping to meet his soulmate.

"Or... you might have met her today, and saved her from an explosion."

Brock's eyes popped open again, and Jane held up her left hand, palm out. Four words were written there in a sharp, black script. *Are you all right?*

He stared at the words in disbelief for several long moments, until the silence was broken by Helen dropping the last piece of shrapnel into the bowl.

"I guess I should leave you two alone," Helen said, stepping back from the couch and smiling at Jane. "Just try not to make any more mess, hm? It's going to be fun enough sterilising this place again as it is." She swept out, the door clicking closed behind her, but neither Brock nor Jane even glanced in her direction, too busy staring at each other.

Brock made to push himself upright, before suddenly remembering his near-nakedness. He grinned sheepishly as he pulled what was left of his ruined jacket to cover his groin. Jane looked him up and down quite unabashedly, an appreciative little smile on her lips as she took in the chiselled muscles of his torso and abs, the thickness of his arms, the breadth of his shoulders.

"Now *that's* what I call a view," she murmured.

Brock laughed as Jane took her sweet time finishing her inspection, her gaze going down to check in his muscled thighs before slowly moving back up to his face. "My eyes are up here, when you've finished," he drawled, enjoying the pretty blush that touched her cheeks again.

"God damn, but you're beautiful."

“I was just thinking the same thing,” Jane admitted. She’d been thinking about the way she’d have to be clasp him for their soulmarks to meet, too. Him buried deep inside her, her hands on his ass... her pulse was racing just thinking about it, and she could feel herself getting wet between her legs.

Rumlow’s nostrils flared, and she had a sudden awful suspicion.

“You have super-senses? Super-smell...”

He dropped the ruined jacket and rose to his feet, moving with the lithe grace of a tiger, stalking towards her. Instinctively, Jane backed up until her back hit the wall, her breathing coming fast, chest heaving. His hands landed on either side of her head, caging her in.

“I can smell what you want,” Rumlow whispered, his breath hot against her lips. “So why don’t you take it?”

He didn’t have to ask twice.

***Chapter 65*: Claire’s Vigilante Superhero Orphan Collection ...**

A sharp shrill from her phone jerked Claire out of a deep sleep. Groaning, she grabbed for it, brought it to her ear.

“Lo.”

“Claire, it’s Matt. I need your help.”

“Because of course you fucking do,” she sighed, pushing herself to sit upright and reaching to turn on the lamp. “What is it this time, and where are you? Where’s the wound?”

“Back of the left shoulder, a bullet. Lodged in the shoulder blade I think.”

“Yeah, you won’t be able to pull that one out. You need a hospital, Matt.”

“It’s not me that’s wounded. And a hospital’s out of the question. Buzz me in, Claire.”

Her doorbell chimed at that moment and she cursed under her breath before climbing out of bed. “Who is it? Please tell me it’s not that Punisher guy.”

“No... *he’s* smart enough to wear a Kevlar vest.” There was a distinctly sarcastic note in Matt’s voice. “It’s an old friend, actually. From my childhood.”

“From the orphanage?” Phone held to her ear, she pushed the button to let him in the front door, starting turning on lights in her apartment. “Don’t tell me *two* of you grew up to be vigilante superheroes.”

“Okay then.”

“Wait, two of you really *did* grow up to be vigilante superheroes?”

The phone went dead just before a light tap sounded at her apartment door. Claire dropped her phone on the table and hurried to open up, surprised to see Matt carrying a slight young woman dressed all in black.

“Put her there,” she gestured at the couch, which she’d already prudently covered with a large towel. Far too many superheroes had bled on the damn thing. “So who is she, and why can’t she go to a hospital... oh, never mind. I see. Fantastic, you’re bringing me actual wanted criminals now.” She frowned as she got a good look at the girl’s face. “Agent, or former Agent, I should say, Daisy Johnson.”

“She was Mary-Sue Poots when we were in St. Agnes,” Matt said, laying Daisy carefully on the sofa, on her left side. “Which was a name the nuns made up, because she didn’t have one. She took the name Skye later on, but apparently she eventually found out where she came from

and Daisy Johnson is her real name.”

“And she killed the Patriot.” Claire scowled down at the unconscious girl, her arms folded.

“Don’t believe everything you see. That footage was faked.”

“According to her, I presume?”

“You do know that I can tell when people are lying, right?” Matt sounded tired as he pulled off his mask. “Are you going to help, Claire, or am I going to have to dig that bullet out on my own?”

“Ugh, I can’t let you do that to the poor girl. Who shot her, anyway? I thought she could deflect bullets and stuff?”

“Only if she sees them coming,” Matt said as she snapped on a pair of gloves and picked up scissors to cut off Daisy’s jacket and shirt. “She was kicking ass and taking names when a ricochet off a fire escape hit her in the back off the shoulder.”

“It slowed it down,” Claire murmured, peering at the bloody hole she’d exposed. “Which is why it didn’t go through. She’s lucky; if it hadn’t lodged in the scapula it would have gone straight through her lung. Pass me that Tupperware box on the kitchen counter.”

Matt picked it up and placed it down beside her. He knew it contained her surgical tools, kept sterile inside the plastic container. She flipped open the lid, selected a pair of forceps.

“You’d better hold onto her. This might wake her up.”

Matt settled to his knees, grasped onto Daisy’s forearm and placed his other hand on her ribs. “Now don’t be mean on purpose,” he suggested with a light note of teasing in his voice.

“Pfeh,” Claire snorted at him before beginning a careful probe. She could feel the edges of the bullet, smashed right into Daisy’s shoulder blade. Gripping on with the forceps, she wiggled gently. “Damn... this is pretty stuck.” Wiggling harder, she finally felt the bullet move, shifting slightly in the bone... just as Daisy screamed.

“Sorry, sorry!” Claire yelped, stumbling back, forceps still clutched tightly in her hand, the bullet clamped firmly in between the jaws.

“Easy, Daisy, you were shot,” Matt said, keeping his voice low and steady as he held Daisy down. “We’re with a friend of mine. She just removed the bullet. Remember? I promised I wouldn’t take you to a hospital.”

One dark eye peered at Claire from behind a fringe of wavy black hair, examined the forceps in her hand. Daisy had been pushing up against Matt’s grip, but slowly, she let herself go limp again.

“Fucking hurts,” she muttered. “Doesn’t she have any local anaesthetic?”

“I’m sorry,” Claire apologized again, dropping the bloodied bullet in her trash and putting the forceps in the sink to wash and re-sterilize later. “I don’t. And now I’m going to have to stitch that wound closed, too.”

That dark eye surveyed her for a few seconds before Daisy’s head jerked in a small nod. Returning to kneel down beside her again, Claire picked up a packet of sutures and ripped it open.

Daisy didn’t make so much as a sound as Claire carefully pulled together the ragged edges of the wound and stitched them. Fortunately it had been a small-calibre bullet, and travelling slowly with the ricochet, hadn’t made nearly as much mess as a direct hit would have done. She made tiny, careful stitches, taking her time, hoping to minimise the scarring.

“There,” she said finally, picking up her scissors to cut the final suture. “You’ll be able to

wear a bikini again one day and nobody will ever know you were shot.”

Matt laughed, releasing Daisy and stepping back. “Trust you to worry about the aesthetics!”

“Trust the blind man not to realize that appearances are important to a girl,” Claire shot back, and from the couch, Daisy chuckled. Using her good arm to push herself upright with a grunt, she smiled at Claire.

“That said, he’s more perceptive than most men, which is tragic,” Claire tipped her head towards Matt. “I’d still advise you against getting involved.”

Daisy’s dark brown eyes widened, and she laughed more freely, stopping with a wince when her shoulder obviously pained her. “Trust me, that’s *never* going to happen,” she said.

Claire froze in the act of peeling off her soiled gloves, spun around. “*What* did you say?” For a moment, she wondered if Matt could have told Daisy... but then, even though they’d been lovers, he couldn’t have ever *seen* her soulmark. She knew there was no texture or raised surface to the words.

For answer, Daisy pulled down the cup of her bra, over her left breast, and showed Claire the single word written there... twice. *Sorry, sorry.*

“Matthew, get out,” Claire said faintly.

“Both of your heart rates are going crazy, what have I missed?” Matt’s unfocussed stare swung between them.

“Soulmates. Now *get out.*”

Matt actually looked surprised, but he was a smart guy. He scooped up his mask and headed straight back out the door with a “You know how to reach me,” tossed over his shoulder, leaving Claire and Daisy alone, staring at each other.

Finally, Daisy patted the couch beside her. “Will you sit down and talk to me? I don’t even know your name.”

“Claire... it’s Claire. Temple. I’m a nurse.”

“Matt said he had a friend who was a nurse, who would patch me up.” Daisy fumbled tentatively for Claire’s hand, pressed gently on her fingers. “Thank you.”

“I was a bit doubtful when I recognized you,” Claire confessed. “But Matt says you didn’t do it and he...” she ran down, unsure just how much Daisy knew about Matt’s abilities.

“You can’t successfully lie to Matt,” Daisy said. “Because of... what he is. I should warn you that it’s pretty hard to lie to me, too.”

“Really?”

“Yeah... at least, once I’ve gotten to know people a little bit. When you speak, the sound is caused by vibrations in your larynx, right? And vibrations are my thing. So I can tell when the vibrations change, which they do when someone is lying. Even if it’s in miniscule ways. Even if it’s by omission, sometimes.”

Daisy looked a little bit uncertain how Claire would react to that revelation. But Claire had never had any intention of lying to her soulmate, even by omission. She smiled at Daisy, squeezed her hand in return.

“That is *so* cool.”

Daisy’s grin was wide, relieved. “So how do you know Matt?” she asked.

“Fished him out of my Dumpster one time.”

“... That is a story I need to hear.”

Claire giggled at Daisy’s avid look. “Not tonight. Tonight, I want to hear *your* story.”

Daisy sighed. "It's long and messy and complicated."

"Sounds like I should open a bottle of wine."

"That," Daisy rolled her head back against the back of the couch, "sounds like a *wonderful* idea."

"Good thing I have a bottle of red in the kitchen then, huh?" Getting up to fetch two glasses, Claire brought the bottle back as well. Daisy's fingers sought her again as she sat down, and Claire took her hand, feeling the strength in that fine-boned hand. Meeting Daisy's eyes, she smiled. "I'm so glad Matt brought you here. Not glad that he *had* to, obviously, but that I finally got to meet you."

"You too." Daisy took a sip of her wine, sighed, and nestled deeper into the couch, wincing as the stitches in her shoulder pulled. "So... I guess I should start with the Nazis who kidnapped my mother and murdered her... and my father who brought her back to life again."

***Chapter 66*: How Could You? (Brock Rumlow/May Parker)**

Looking at the steep wooden stairs leading up into the apartment block, Brock Rumlow took a deep, steadying breath.

He hadn't been afraid like this since... well, since ever, he thought. Even facing down Captain America in an elevator, knowing one misplaced punch might kill him, hadn't engendered this feeling of queasy panic in the pit of his stomach.

But then, that would have been a quick death. The rejection that almost certainly awaited him at the top of those ramshackle steps would be a slow, agonising one.

Setting one foot on the bottom step took more courage than facing Steve Rogers had again, and that was a hell of a lot. Somehow, though, he summoned it, and headed upwards.

The door to the apartment, at least, looked secure. Surveying it with experienced eyes, Rumlow estimated it would take him a good seven or eight minutes to pick the three high-grade locks, and the door was heavy enough, and set well enough into its frame, it would take explosives or a battering ram to break it down if it was bolted properly from the other side.

Of course, all those things were pretty useless against any bad guy with a brain, since the walls in the whole building were flimsy at best. He'd just kick his way through the drywall if he wanted into the apartment quickly.

He was deliberately stalling, Rumlow recognized. Fact was, he wasn't here to break into the apartment, though it was seriously debatable if the lady who lived inside would open the door once she got a look at him through the peephole, and she was definitely smart enough not to open it if he covered it with his hand. He'd taught her that himself.

"Knock, you cowardly bastard," he sneered at himself finally, and lifted his fist to rap his knuckles sharply against the door.

He couldn't hear anything on the other side, but he knew she was in there. Loitering in an alley, he'd watched her enter the building, weighed down with grocery bags, about twenty minutes earlier. By now, he estimated she'd have finished putting things away and probably started cooking, maybe making some of her famous *fettucine carbonara*. His mouth watered at the mere thought, but he schooled his face into a patient, neutral expression.

The sound of the bolts sliding back, when it came, was sharp, as though the person opening the door was in a hurry. Locks snapped and suddenly the door was flung wide.

"*Chain*, May," Brock said reproachfully.

“Like that would stop you!” She planted her hands on her hips and glared at him, golden-brown eyes snapping fire. “What are you doing here?”

That, of course, was the million-dollar question. He arched a brow at her. “Could I come in? I don’t think this is a conversation we should be having in the hallway.”

She was just as beautiful as he remembered, even though it had been nine years since he’d been this close to her. He’d watched over her, of course, from the shadows where he lived his life, made sure she was safe. Taken care of a few people who’d known who she was to him and thought they could use her against him, before they even got close.

Following May into the apartment, he looked around curiously. She’d gotten an army pension after his fake death, but she’d still downgraded from the apartment they’d shared to this smaller place. She and Peter had been here ever since.

“Hurry it up,” May said, closing the door behind them. “What the hell are you going to say if Peter gets back? I don’t expect him for a while, but still... he’ll freak out.”

“Will he even recognize me? He was only eight when I... left.”

“When you *died*, as far as he was concerned.” May glared at him. “In the stupidest and most dramatic way possible! He knew you were in the military, for God’s sake, would it have killed you to wait until you could go away on a mission and ‘die heroically’ overseas?” Her voice rose until she was yelling at him.

“No, but it would have killed you,” Rumlow said. “Or rather, the men who told me I had to go undercover full-time would have.”

That took the wind out of her sails, albeit temporarily. She narrowed her eyes at him.

“What do you mean, undercover *full-time*? You were never undercover. Were you?”

Here it comes, Rumlow thought, but his tongue seemed stuck to the roof of his mouth. May folded her arms and stared at him.

“Ben?”

And there was the killer. To May, he was Benjamin Parker, a man who happened to share the same surname as her dead brother-in-law even though they were no relation. A man she’d met at a barbecue thrown by a mutual friend, unaware that mutual friend was on SHIELD’s payroll. And even though she was the most beautiful woman at that party, Rumlow would still have paid attention to her, hit on her... because that was the specific reason he was there.

May Andreotti was Justin Hammer’s PA, and SHIELD wanted to know exactly what Hammer was up to. Intelligence had discovered he put the utmost trust in his PA, and SHIELD decided she was their way in. Assessing her known dating history and preferences, they examined their pool of potential candidates and sent in Rumlow.

* * *

This would be no hardship, he found himself thinking as the stunning woman stepped out into the backyard, a large dish of potato salad in her hands. May was even more beautiful than her photograph.

“Can I help you with that?” he sidled up beside her and asked gallantly.

She turned to look at him with wide, golden-brown eyes, and smiled. “I sure hope so,” she said, and watched him closely, her breath held.

He’d stalled out completely, mouth hanging open, a loop of *ohshitohshit* running around his brain. There was nothing in her file about her having a soulmark; it must be somewhere very private.

Which made sense, considering the location of his own...

"Um," he said inanely, trying to think of a way to get out of this. But right at that moment the other SHIELD employee came up beside him, clapping a hand on his shoulder.

"I see you've met Ben Parker, May! Watch out for this one. He's quite the ladies' man."

"*Really*," May said, and the look she turned on him was full of laughter. "Maybe he's just waiting for the right one."

He was lost.

* * *

Of course, he still had to carry out his mission. Being May's soulmate should just make it quicker for him to gain her trust, Peggy Carter had said coolly, her eyes unflinching. SHIELD would do their best to avoid burning his cover, though. In case he wanted to try and actually maintain a relationship with her.

He'd hated every minute of it, but he'd done it; quietly hacking May's laptop so the SHIELD boffins could see everything she did on it, and passing along whatever tiny tidbits about Hammer she let slip. Which wasn't much; she was professional and discreet, even with him. Hammer was an asshole, on the couple of occasions Brock met him; he privately assessed the man as a blowhard and no threat. SHIELD must have agreed with him, because after a while they stopped asking him questions and permitted him to put May down as next-of-kin on his personnel file. Even though she didn't know his real name.

He was covered as a captain in the Army, so regular absences were expected as far as May was concerned, especially with the ongoing wars in the Middle East. 'Ben' would return to her tired, dusty and tanned after weeks away, and she never questioned it or pushed him to talk about what he did when he was away.

Which was good. He was already living a lie.

May's large, Italian family took him to their hearts. He met her sister Lucia only once, just before she and her husband died, but he never hesitated when May told him they were taking Peter into their home. His own memories of being an unwanted orphan, a foster child shuttled between homes, were still scars deep inside him.

"Of course," he told his sobbing soulmate, and then he took the blue-eyed baby boy in his arms. "His place is with family."

They'd married a week later, still under his alias, of course, and he'd convinced SHIELD to agree to make May and Peter his dependents in the case of his death. They'd be looked after; not rich, but taken care of.

The one thing he hadn't foreseen was that prick Hammer letting Vanko run amok with technology and try to publicly off Tony Stark.

With Hammer's very public downfall and the collapse of HammerTech, May was suddenly out of a job, and not only that, tainted by association. Nobody would hire her. Of no further use to SHIELD, Brock assumed they'd just let her go.

Of course, he hadn't reckoned with Hydra. They'd been using HammerTech for their own purposes ever since Obadiah Stane's demise cut them off from Stark Industries, and they were *pissed*. He'd been slowly infiltrating their operation, waiting for them to approach him and biding his time, reporting only to Nick Fury, when everything went to shit.

Hydra didn't like loose ends, and to their way of thinking, May Andreotti-Parker was definitely a loose end. They ordered him to kill her.

He'd kept the truth of their relationship to a very limited few, and he knew for sure none of them were Hydra then. Ordering a man to kill his own soulmate was a sure way to start a rebellion. Instead, he bargained; she knew nothing, he'd said. She believed he was just a soldier, nothing more.

Hydra soldiers don't get to have personal lives, he was told. Yours is done. Kill her... and the child.

What if he faked his own death? Rumlow asked in a flash of desperate inspiration. He'd never see her again. Better than having the police looking for him as suspicious in the death of his wife and adopted child.

His Hydra handler considered that, and finally conceded the point. They'd set up a street mugging the following day. Until then, do nothing to make May suspicious. He couldn't take any personal belongings from the apartment. Nothing. No goodbyes.

He defied them, of course, because he had no choice. May would know, when her soulmark didn't fade, that he was far from dead. Instead he lied to her one more time, told her that he'd been tasked with a dangerous job, full-time undercover, rooting out terrorists and traitors.

As May stared at him now, Rumlow remembered the look of utter betrayal on her face. "You're leaving us," she'd whispered. "You're choosing this *job* over *us*?"

* * *

"I'm sorry, May. I'm so sorry." He repeated now the last words he'd said to her back then, but this time, he followed it with a truth.

"My name's not Ben."

"Of course," she waved a hand expressively. "What's your new identity, then? What should I call you now?"

"No, you don't understand." He steeled himself. "My name is Brock Rumlow. It... was always Brock Rumlow. Ben Parker was the alias."

He saw the rage dawn on her face as she absorbed that, but was still taken by surprise when she took a fast step forward and slapped him across the face with all her strength.

Of course, he could have stopped her. Hydra had given him several enhancements in the last few years, while he was playing the part of their loyal soldier. Still, May had a right to her anger. Brock let his head snap to the side, a grunt escape his lips, before looking back at her.

"Was any of it real?" she hissed at him, her face scarlet with fury. "The soulmark - did you *fake* yours somehow?"

"You know better than that!" That accusation cut deep. They'd bonded the very first time they had sex, and though the bond had never been a deep one - he suspected probably because he was concealing too much from her - it was very real, and had never faded despite their years apart. Perhaps because he had never actually been able to stay all that far away.

"Apparently I don't fucking know anything about you!" She was yelling now, her fiery Italian passion coming to the fore. They'd never had a peaceful relationship, had always fought and loved with tempestuous passion. Indeed, having May shout at him produced a disturbingly familiar physical reaction.

"You utter bastard!"

He allowed her the second slap too, this one on the other side of his face, but when she started pummeling at his chest with her tiny fists, he caught them gently in his.

"May, you'll hurt yourself. Stop."

"How could you?" Tears streaked her cheeks as she looked up at him. "*How could you?*"

He'd asked himself that any number of times over the last few years, and at the end of the day there was only one answer he could give. "May... I was with SHIELD."

Her lips parted with shock, her eyes flying wide. While she was temporarily lost for words, Brock plunged ahead.

"I was assigned to you because of Justin Hammer. SHIELD wanted inside information they knew you had. My being your soulmate was definitely not in the plan. I was supposed to seduce you, get what we needed and disappear. I had to fight for every minute they allowed us together... and then Hydra made an approach to recruit me."

"You were *Hydra*?"

It was a good thing he was holding onto her hands. He saw her eyes flick over to the kitchen counter, to the heavy knife she'd been using to prepare dinner.

"I was placed undercover in Hydra by Nick Fury," Brock said hastily. "Though to be honest, I didn't have a lot of options. Once Hydra make an approach, it's pretty much accept or be erased. And that was a choice I was faced with when the Vanko shit went down with Hammer and you lost your job. SHIELD couldn't care less if I stayed married to you, but Hydra saw you as an encumbrance. I was ordered to eliminate you, and Peter."

"*What?*"

"They gave me twenty-four hours to eliminate you," Brock told her quietly. "It wasn't enough time for me to get you out to safety, and I doubt Fury would have helped me out at the time. The situation with Hydra was very delicately poised. In the end, I offered Hydra a compromise; I'd fake my own death, disappear out of your life for good, and there wouldn't be any messy police investigation looking into your death. Please believe me, May, I would have done anything to stay with you, but there was nothing I could do. I either had to fake my own death, or Hydra would have you and Peter killed."

"Those bastards," May whispered, gazing into his eyes, and he could tell she believed him.

"I stayed away to keep you safe, at first, and later because I ended up playing a bigger part in events than I expected and I didn't want you to be targeted. Hydra might have been crushed, for now, but they're never completely gone, and I'm Traitor Number One as far as they're concerned. They'd do anything to take me down."

May nodded, understanding, but then her eyes narrowed. "So why are you here?"

Brock arched an eyebrow and waited.

May pursed her lips.

"Really." It wasn't a question. "Are you really going to try and pretend, to *me*, that Peter isn't Spider-Man?"

"Peter's *what*?" Her eyes widened comically.

"Unlike me, you're a terrible liar."

She tried to look indignant, but she was a dreadful actress too. He sighed and shook his head.

"I'm not here to recruit Peter for SHIELD or anything like that. Stark's got him well in hand. I'm here for you."

"What?" May's expression underwent several more radical shifts.

"Peter can look after himself. By the very nature of what he's doing, though, he's going

to make enemies, and those enemies are going to look for his vulnerabilities. Of which the biggest one..."

"Is me," May said, the truth dawning on her.

"Fury ordered a guard put on you. I told him I wasn't prepared to entrust your safety to anyone other than myself. There's no way I could watch closely enough without you becoming aware of me, though, so," he spread his arms wide, "here I am."

For a long moment, she just stared at him, and then she said "Are those *scars* on your face?"

Brock's hand flew up to his left cheek, where the worst of the scarring was taking a long time to fade away despite the enhanced healing properties his body now had. "Uh, yes. When the Triskelion fell, I was kinda... trapped." He tactfully didn't say crushed under the wreckage. Even with what Hydra had done to him, it had been touch and go for his survival for quite a while.

"I wondered," May said softly. "My soulmark faded in and out for days." Her small hand reached up to touch his face, and he couldn't help himself. He closed his eyes and leaned into her touch, savouring the contact.

Delicate fingers traced down across his jaw, over the white lines on his neck to the collar of his T-shirt. "How far down to they go?" she asked.

Brock winced. The scars were actually worse under his shirt, because the fabric of the T-shirt he'd been wearing had burned into his flesh and those wounds were taking longer to heal. The medical boffins at SHIELD assured him that at his current rate of healing, they would probably be gone entirely in another couple of years, but right now, they were still pink and raised.

"All down my chest and thighs," he admitted. "Combat boots protected my calves."

"I want to see." Determinedly, she tugged at his shirt. "Take it off."

He had no plans to ever deny her anything again if he could possibly help it, so he stripped off his shirt.

"Oh, *Ben*," May whispered, before her eyes flew back to his face. "Sorry... Brock?"

"Yeah." Hearing his real name on her lips for the first time, he had to take a deep breath. "Brock."

"Wait. Are we actually married?"

"Technically, your husband is dead. So no."

"Hm." The light of mischief entered her eyes. "Do you mean, we could do it all over again, and this time I could have that big wedding I always dreamed of and be a total Bridezilla?"

He had to laugh. She was reaching to unbuckle his belt, though, and he looked down and said "Um...?"

"I want to see the rest of your scars. See how capable my husband is going to be on his wedding night."

She was bending down to inspect a nasty scar on his left thigh when Peter's bedroom door swung open.

* * *

Peter was several streets away, watching a young mugger debating with himself whether to try and hassle Jessica Jones and basically just waiting for the show, when he heard May's shrieks. He might not quite have Daredevil's hearing, but he'd know his aunt's screams

anywhere. Leaping off the building he was perched atop, he swung back to the apartment as fast as he could.

A peek in the main window showed May wasn't in immediate danger; she stood with her hands on her hips, facing a solidly built, dark-haired man with his back to the window.

Peter didn't particularly want to think about what Aunt May might say if he kicked the window in unnecessarily and she had to explain to a stranger why Spider-Man just smashed into her living room, so he slipped in through his bedroom window, hastily yanked on some regular clothes, and opened the door.

Only to see his aunt on her knees in front of the now-shirtless stranger, doing...

Oh God, please say she wasn't doing what he thought she was doing. He could only see the side of her head at an angle, and the stranger's hips were hidden behind the kitchen counter, but considering her position...

"I so don't need to see that!" he blurted.

"Peter!" Aunt May shot to her feet, and the stranger whipped around lightning-fast. Too fast. Peter's eyes narrowed, and he tensed, but then he got a really good look at the stranger's face.

The silence stretched for nearly a minute.

"Uncle Ben?" Peter whispered at last, suddenly eight years old again, lifted on his uncle's strong shoulders to see over the crowds at the Stark Expo.

The man winced. "Yeah. About that..."

***Chapter 67*: The Collector/Brock Rumlow (BoneCollector)**

"Brought you something interesting, Collector."

Taneleer Tivan didn't even glance up from his work. "My Collection is closed until I am able to complete the new catalogue." The stylus snapped in his fingers, and he took a deep breath before selecting another. "I am not acquiring new exhibits."

"You'll want this one."

Deakon was a mercenary, an annoying one, but someone who'd brought him interesting items in the past. His voice seemed quite certain, so Taneleer considered briefly before finally looking up. His eyes narrowed.

"Is that a *human*? What's wrong with its face?"

"Fuck off," the scar-faced human snapped. "You're not exactly a supermodel yourself. What's with that hair? Stick your finger in a power socket?"

Despite his irritation at being interrupted, Taneleer found himself smiling. Humans were a rarity in the wider galaxy, but prized for several reasons, one of them being their incredible adaptability and the other being their sardonic sense of humor.

Taneleer just called it rudeness. And there were precious few beings of any species who dared be rude to him. This one might alleviate the tedium, for a while at least.

"It's ugly," Howard the Duck said from across the room. "I don't want to look at it."

"Looked in a mirror at yourself lately?" the human snapped back.

Cosmo, often the final arbiter, barked happily and slipped out from under Taneleer's desk, where he'd been snoozing on his master's feet. Trotting up to the human, he sniffed at his fingers and whined.

"Hey," the human said, gravelly voice softening as he petted Cosmo's head. "Hey. Who's a good boy, then?"

“So do you want it, or not?” Deakon asked eagerly.

Taneleer waved his hand. “Standard fee. Now leave.” He was interested in watching the human interact with Cosmo. Two beings from the same planet of origin, even though one of them had a low sentience level, they seemed instinctively drawn to each other. Studying their interactions could be intriguing.

“What is your name, human?” He opened a new card in his database, preparing to enter details.

“Brock Rumlow,” the human said. “Who’s asking?”

“I am Taneleer Tivan, known as the Collector. What happened to cause your scars, or were you born like that?”

“A building fell on me. What happened to cause your hair, or were you born like that?”

It had been a long time since Taneleer laughed, truly laughed, but he did so now. “My birth was so long ago, none living now remember it.”

“Whatever you say, Gramps.” Still petting Cosmo’s ears, Rumlow looked around at the exhibition cases, many still empty, though all had been repaired. “So what do you collect?”

“Things which are rare and unique, or of particular interest due to their part in an important historical event. Or, on occasion, simply things which it amuses me to have.”

“Which category do I fall in?”

“That remains to be seen.” Setting down his stylus, Taneleer stood and approached Rumlow. Moving around him slowly, he inspected the heavily muscled form - wider than other humans he had observed, though not taller - and considered his scars. “I think an ordinary human would not have survived the events that caused those scars, which means you are no ordinary human.” Reaching out to lightly touch the ridged white scar tissue on Rumlow’s jaw, he was not really all that surprised when the man’s hand flashed up with far greater speed than any human should be capable of and grabbed his wrist.

He *was* surprised when his wrist began to burn with pain, though. He’d touched humans before and not suffered any ill effects; they did not secrete any substances through their skin which would be hazardous to his kind.

“What the fuck?” Rumlow let go, looking at his hand in surprise. However surprised he might be, it was nothing compared to Taneleer’s shock as he saw the sigils on his wrist, in a language which he had not seen written in more eons than he cared to recall.

“That is *not possible*,” he said, stunned.

“Why is your name tattooed on my hand? What the fuck is this, some sort of slave brand? I don’t fucking want it, and you’d better believe I’m perfectly willing to cut away some of my own skin to get rid of it...”

“It’s not a tattoo,” Taneleer cut off his rant. “It is a soulmate mark.”

“A what now?”

“It is said that no single body can be great enough to contain an entire soul. So they are split into parts, halves or thirds, and when those whose bodies meet come into contact - if they ever do - they will know each other by their touch.” Awed, he turned his wrist, gazing at the sigils. “Do you know how long I have lived, searching for the other half of my soul? Do you have any idea how *rare* it is, to find the other half of one’s soul?”

“No, and no.” Rumlow gave him a searching stare. “I don’t think we have this on Earth.”

“Even on a planet with billions of beings, the chances of there being two halves of one soul are incredibly small. That those two might meet? Astronomically miniscule.” Reaching out

again, Taneleer took Rumlow's hand in his, lightly caressing the words now permanently etched into the other man's palm.

"My Collection is finally complete," he said softly. "I have found the rarest, most unique treasure of all."

***Chapter 68*: Darcy/Rogue/Remy**

"Put your eyes back in your head, cher," Remy nudged Anna-Marie, laughing when she didn't even bother to turn her head to look at him.

"Shut up, I'm appreciating a work of art."

"More a miracle of nature, cher."

"You're sure they're natural?"

Remy chuckled and kissed the top of his soulmate's head. "Take it from a man who's seen a great many unnatural bosoms - that beauty has nothing more than what the good Lord gave her."

Rogue sighed with a combination of envy and lust. Remy put his arm around her, not wanting her to be jealous that he couldn't take his eyes off the exceptionally magnificent bosom the young woman on the other side of the room was quite unwittingly flashing them. He was pretty sure she hadn't the faintest idea the top button of her blouse had given up under the strain and come loose, treating them all to a spectacular view.

Pretty much every man in the room was appreciating the view, and several of the women, though he noticed nobody was approaching the young woman to quietly advise her she was flashing them all. He knew Anna-Marie wouldn't care to be unwittingly exposed in such a way, so he quietly suggested to her that they go and introduce themselves and she discreetly advise the other woman of the issue.

"Good plan, sugar." She smiled up at him. "She'll be less embarrassed by a couple approaching her. I hope."

Darcy had been surreptitiously eyeing the gorgeous couple when they entered with the rest of the X-Men. They were obviously together, though they kept a little apart from most of the others. The woman had porcelain-pale skin and long brown hair with a white streak in the front Darcy suspected was natural; she was beautiful enough to make Darcy want to sink into the carpet and die, especially in a green leather sleeveless bodysuit with matching green leather elbow-length gloves.

Stunning as she was, it was the man by her side who drew all eyes. Accustomed to gorgeous men, still Darcy struggled not to stare. He looked almost too perfect to be real, every plane and angle of his face in perfect proportion, silky brown hair tumbling to his broad shoulders, close-fitting waistcoat over a silk shirt and black pants less revealing than many of the outfits the other superheroes wore but somehow showcasing his tall, muscled form even better.

And they were headed in her direction, Darcy suddenly realized, both of them looking straight at her. Oh God, they'd caught her staring; she looked frantically around but she'd put herself in a corner for a reason, to stay out of the way. Now there was no escape.

"Excuse me, sugar," the woman said in a slow Mississippi drawl as thick as molasses, "there's a little problem."

Startled, Darcy blinked, her mouth dropping open. "What?" she said stupidly, before mentally cursing herself. She'd had her entire life to prepare for this moment and not a single one

of the clever responses she'd mentally prepared to the words had come to her lips.

Green eyes narrowed, the woman's head tilting slightly before she looked quickly at her partner. He'd stiffened with reaction too.

One chance to get this right, Darcy...

"Long shot," she said to the man, "but you're so gorgeous I'd never forgive myself if I didn't ask. Are you my soulmate?"

The smile he gave her made him even more beautiful and she idly wondered if that was his superpower; just stunning people with his good looks. And then he said "I certainly hope so, cher," in a Louisiana accent which made her knees go weak.

Both of them were smiling at her, moving in closer. "I'm Remy, and this is Anna-Marie, also known as Gambit and Rogue," Remy introduced.

"Darcy Lewis, no superhero name or powers," she smiled wryly. "How did I get this lucky?"

"Trust me, sugar, right now we're thinking we're the lucky ones," Rogue told her with a joyous smile. "Though, uh, we did come over to tell you about a little problem." She gestured at her chest.

Darcy looked down with a frown before stifling a shriek. "Oh god. Oh no." Hastily she did the offending button back up, cursing as it promptly popped open again. "Agh! I don't suppose either of you have the superpower of instantly repairing clothing?"

"Afraid not, cher," but Remy was already unbuttoning his waistcoat and sliding it off, offering it to her. "Here, put this on and button it up."

The waistcoat actually did the trick, buttoning up high enough to cover the gaping front of her blouse.

What everyone else in the room thought of her wearing Remy's waistcoat, she didn't really want to know, but it was better than showing them half her bra.

"Can we get out of here?" Darcy mumbled, red-faced and convinced everyone was staring at her.

"Sure. Meeting your soulmate is a sure-fire way to get out of even the dullest meeting," Anna-Marie said with a grin.

She was quite right; they were soon on their way out of the room with congratulations ringing in their ears, hopping in the elevator and heading down to Darcy's apartment.

Where she didn't know quite what to do with them. Meeting both her soulmates at the same time had always been a possibility, of course, but now they were here and both so spectacular looking, and superpowered - she desperately wanted five minutes alone to google their superhero names and find out what they could do - she kind of froze up.

At least until Remy jumped in the air, looked down at Anna-Marie and said "Why is your hand on my ass, cher?"

"Darcy looks uncomfortable, but also kind of like she'd like to feel us both up," Rogue explained. "I thought I'd get started and encourage her to join in. Give his ass a grab, Darcy; trust me, it's well worth it. The man has buns of steel."

Anna-Marie's teasing tone, and the way Remy rolled his eyes and laughed, made Darcy suddenly relax and start laughing too.

"I was appreciating yours just as much in that catsuit," she confessed to Anna-Marie.

"You can grab mine too, I don't mind in the least, sugar." Anna-Marie's green eyes laughed with her. "Any time you like."

***Chapter 69*: Hunter/Natasha**

“You ready, Hunter?” Daisy popped her head around the open door of his room, catching him lying on the bed reading. “Come on, we agreed we were going to spar this morning!”

He groaned and lowered his book to peer at the top of her over it. “Luv, I’ve still got bruises from the last bout.”

“That’s because it was only the day before yesterday. Come on, lazybones. Bet the SAS didn’t let you slack off like this!”

“Correct, which is why I left.”

Daisy kicked the end of the bed and Hunter grunted. “All right. Gimme a minute to get my trackies on.” He glared at her when she just folded her arms. “What, you’re really that keen to see my naked butt? I’m not wearing pants under these pyjamas!”

“Ah.” She turned around hastily, and he rolled his eyes at her back before getting out of bed and finding some track pants. He’d long since given up on wearing a shirt when sparring with any of the SHIELD girls. They always got torn up.

“Did you eat yet?” Daisy asked as they approached the gym door.

“No, and after that kick to the guts which had me losing my breakfast last time, I think I’ll wait till after, thanks. Is May around today?”

“No, she said she was busy. Which is why I came and got you.” She poked a finger into the ticklish spot in his ribs, which made him squall and bolt through the doorway ahead of her.

“Bitch!” he yelled back over his shoulder, at which point his forward motion was suddenly arrested by a pair of thighs wrapping around his neck, flipping his body up and around before slamming him to the ground.

“Oooh, do that again,” Hunter said breathlessly, staring starry-eyed up into the face of the beautiful redhead sitting on his chest.

May, a few feet away, burst out laughing. “I think that’s the first time anyone’s ever said that about the Thigh Hold of Doom, Nat!”

Natasha gave her a narrow-eyed stare before turning it on Hunter. “You don’t get to make demands,” she said, her tone one of soft menace, before she rose gracefully to her feet, leaving him still lying flat on his back with his erection making a very obvious tent in his trousers.

“Are you fucking kidding me,” Daisy was trying very hard not to laugh, or look at his pants, as she offered him a hand up. “What is it with you and women who can kick your ass six ways to Sunday? Are you a secret submissive or something?”

“Ain’t nuthin’ secret about it, luv.” He winked at her impishly before following after Natasha, to where she had walked over to converse with May, and falling to his knees at her feet, bowing his head.

May stared down at him, her mouth falling open with shock. Natasha smiled very slightly and placed her hand on the back of his neck.

“Uhhh... have you two met?” Daisy asked, joining the little group and staring down at Hunter with wide, shocked eyes.

“We just did,” Natasha said calmly, “but I’ve been waiting for him my whole life.” Gently, she traced with one fingernail the words printed in tiny, neat handwriting at the base of Hunter’s skull, not quite concealed by his short hair.

You don’t get to make demands.

"I've been waiting for you too, my Queen," Hunter said, leaning in slightly so that his shoulder touched her leg. She petted his head and he shivered with pleasure.

"I think we'll cut this session short, if you don't mind, Melinda," Natasha said. "I want to see if my new soulmate knows how to behave himself. Take me to your room," she told Hunter when May nodded, flabbergasted.

Hunter didn't even get to his feet, just crawled towards the door until Natasha told him softly to get up. She never took her hand off the back of his neck, though.

As the door closed behind the pair, May and Daisy looked at each other.

"Can we never, ever speak of this again?" Daisy was the first to find her voice.

"Better yet, let's just pretend it never happened."

"Deal."

***Chapter 70*: Quake/Valkyrie (Brunnhilde)**

"So, let me get this straight," Coulson said for the third time, "Asgard is *gone*?"

"Destroyed," the dark-haired, brown-skinned woman in the very shiny armor and rippling blue cloak said with a nod.

"I didn't do it," Daisy said almost automatically as Coulson's gaze slid to her. *Would she ever get past being called Destroyer of Worlds?* she wondered.

The woman's head tilted as she gave Daisy an assessing look, and then she smiled, a flash of brilliant white teeth. "Since you are neither Hela nor Surtur, no. You did not, whoever you are. Though I am intrigued as to how you think it possible you might."

"Me too," the huge rock-like being behind her rumbled. "Because if this world's going to go the same way as Asgard, no offence, bru, but me and Miek are out of here."

"None taken," Coulson said, brow furrowed. "Is that a New Zealand accent?"

"I don't know what that is, bru. I'm Kronan and Miek's Sakaaran. He doesn't say much, though."

"If only the same were true for you," the woman said, not at all quietly, and Daisy had to choke back a laugh. She got a wink for that.

Damn, she's sexy as hell.

"All right," Coulson said at last. "I'll start making calls. Daisy, would you help... um, I didn't get your name, my lady?"

"I don't have a title." She seemed to struggle for a moment. "My name is..."

"Scraper 142," Korg said helpfully.

"That's not my name." She took a deep breath. "It's Brunnhilde."

"Well, welcome to Earth, Brunnhilde," Coulson said diplomatically. "Daisy will help you and, ah, Korg, assign temporary quarters for your people. Fortunately, this base was built to accommodate a lot more residents than it currently holds."

"Thank you." Brunnhilde inclined her head very slightly, and Daisy found herself thinking that she might not claim any noble title, but she carried herself even more confidently than Lady Sif had. Coulson gave an awkward little bow in response before nodding to Daisy and leaving the command centre.

"Well," Daisy said after a brief silence. "Do you have some sort of list we can work from?"

"Unfortunately not," Brunnhilde shook her head. "We had to abandon the *Statesman*

when Thanos attacked, in the escape pods, and then tow them here with the *Commodore*. We didn't have proper communications with the pods, and there wasn't room on the *Commodore* to bring them all on board. We'll have to bring them down to the surface one podload at a time... about twenty passengers on each," she added, seeing Daisy's eyes glaze over.

"Okay, and how many pods?" She could deal with twenty people at a time.

"Seventy-one."

On second thoughts, it was gonna be a long few days.

At least she could trade off duties with others, Daisy discovered. Brunnhilde was apparently the only one with the skills to bring the *Commodore* in and out of Earth's atmosphere without alerting NASA and other space agencies to their presence, so she was constantly on duty, piloting the ship up and down on the forty-minute round trip again and again.

"Has she slept?" Daisy asked Korg at one point. The huge Kronan had proved very helpful, unflaggingly cheerful even when tempers frayed, carrying weary Asgardian children and helping with the room assignments.

"I don't think Valkyries need sleep." Korg shook his head with a rock-grinding noise. "They're dead, aren't they?"

"What... I think that's a myth. Do you have the same myth?" Daisy blinked at him, puzzled.

"About Valkyries coming to take fallen warriors to Valhalla?" Korg checked. "Yus. So, obviously, she's dead. And the dead don't need to sleep."

Daisy was pretty sure he'd made an illogical jump there, but she just shook her head and didn't say anything. Not, at least, until the last podload of refugees had been brought down and led off into the now-crowded base by some Asgardians who'd already found their way around.

"So, Korg thinks you don't need any sleep." She switched off her tablet and eyed Brunnhilde, who was standing beside the ship with one arm braced on the door, somehow still looking just as shiny and stunning as she had before the transports started, even though she couldn't have slept more than a few minutes at a time since.

"Why would he think that?" Brunnhilde blinked.

Because he thinks you're already dead didn't seem like a particularly smart answer, so Daisy shrugged. "Because you've been piloting for more than two days straight and you don't seem tired?"

"I'm tired." Brunnhilde pushed off the door and walked forward, slowly. "I'm just used to going a long time without sleep, that's all."

Daisy could see it now she was close enough, the weary slump to her shoulders beneath her armor, the way her sassy, hip-swinging stride had flattened out.

"I have a room set aside for you," she said.

"Yeah?" Brunnhilde gave her an arch look. "Do I have to share? Are we roomies?"

Daisy bit back a smile. Brunnhilde was obviously a flirt. "No... you're assigned a room of your own."

"Shame." Even exhausted, Brunnhilde could still summon up a pretty scorching look. Daisy was pretty sure her panties melted.

"Easy there, tiger. C'mon." She held her hand out, and a little to her surprise, Brunnhilde took it.

The greater surprise was how much her touch burned. Daisy bit back a yelp of pain and even Brunnhilde gasped. Her grasp on Daisy's hand tightened, almost crushing before

Brunnhilde obviously realised her Asgardian strength could cause too much damage to fragile human bones and let go.

“What the hell is that?” Daisy asked in wonder, staring at the mark which had suddenly appeared on her palm. “Is that a *winged horse*?”

“It is.” Brunnhilde inspected her own hand. “And this... is this a thing you understand?”

Daisy peered at the fine black lines on Brunnhilde’s golden-brown skin. “It’s... oh, wait.” She tilted her head. “It’s a computer, I think. And a daisy... and some wavy lines... dunno what that’s about. Maybe it’s about my power.”

“Your power?” Brunnhilde raised her eyebrows interrogatively.

“I can make things vibrate.”

“*Really*.” Brunnhilde’s look was pure heat.

“Not like *that*!” Daisy reconsidered. “Well... maybe like that. I’ve never tried. I’d be afraid of hurting someone.”

“If they were a regular human, right?” Brunnhilde’s grin was absolutely sinful. “I’m willing to be your test subject. Maybe that’s why the Tree gave you an Asgardian for a soulmate, hm?”

“I didn’t think I had a soulmate.” Daisy licked her lips, looking at Brunnhilde, before a slow smile dawned and she returned Brunnhilde’s look of hunger. “Just wait and see what I’m going to do to you once I get you alone!”

“No waiting required, soulmate. Let’s go find that private room you promised me.”

“Don’t you want to rest?” Daisy paused. “You must be exhausted.”

“Sleep is for the weak.” Brunnhilde grinned at her, reclaiming her hand. “And those who’ve had sexual satisfaction. Sex first. Sleep later!”

***Chapter 71*: Daisy/Killmonger (Quakemonger)**

He wasn’t even armed, but when the massive garage door opened to reveal a fight taking place inside, Erik didn’t even hesitate. He leapt from the car before the stunned driver had even stopped it, snatched a weird-looking shotgun-axe weapon from a brother lying unconscious on the ground, and decapitated the ugly white guy who was about to put a bullet in the brother’s head.

The spray of blood which splattered across the next three ugly white guys made them freeze in their tracks, just long enough for Erik to give them a spray of lead. And that gave him some breathing room, not that he needed it. He rearmed from the dead as he moved, snatching up weapons, emptying them and discarding them when he’d finished.

It wasn’t long before the last few mutts were throwing down their weapons and begging for mercy, though it wasn’t all Erik’s doing. A couple of women had been doing most of the heavy lifting, both slight little things dressed in black. One, a Chinese woman with agelessly beautiful features, cast him a glance and a nod before moving away to start ruthlessly restraining prisoners.

“I could take care of that problem for you,” Erik offered with a twitch of the Uzi he was currently holding. He reckoned he still had half a mag in it. More than enough for the four guys currently pissing their pants at the expression on his face.

“Thanks, but I think you’ve already helped us enough,” a soft voice said at his shoulder, and his head snapped to the side, his eyes widening.

The second woman was no taller or sturdier than the first, slight enough she looked as though a breath of wind might blow her away. Delicate features, slightly tilted dark brown eyes, and a slightly golden cast to her skin said she wasn't one hundred percent Caucasian, but she wasn't the colour Erik had expected the woman who spoke his soulmate words to be.

He took a half-step back in unthinking rejection, before catching himself, taking a deep breath. T'Challa would look at him with those disappointed eyes, tell him not to judge on appearances alone. He knew nothing of this woman, nothing of her life, her struggles. All he did know of her was that she was more than human. He'd seen men fall as she flung her hands out towards them, felt the ground tremor under his feet.

"Daisy Johnson," his soulmate said, holding out a small hand. "And yes, if you read the newspapers, that Daisy Johnson, leader of the Inhumans and currently in the Saviour of Humanity phase rather than the Evil Mastermind."

He couldn't help a grin at that, accepting her hand in his and feeling the smallness of it, the softness of her skin.

"And you must be Erik Killmonger, only monarch I've ever heard of with an even shorter reign than Lady Jane Grey."

Ouch. That burned. He winced.

"Or are you going by N'Jadaka now?"

It sounded good on her lips, not stilted or awkward the way a lot of non-Wakandans said it. He could almost get used to it, hearing it from Daisy, even though he hadn't used the name in two decades.

He was opening his mouth to reply when the most medium-looking white guy he'd ever seen came up to him. Medium height, medium looking, medium balding, medium priced suit... seriously, he'd never seen a dude so likely to fade into the background. If he hadn't seen the SHIELD Director's picture, he'd never have guessed this was Phil Coulson.

"Mr Coulson." He offered his hand to shake respectfully. Dude might be white, but according to all reports he had a pair of solid vibranium balls under that medium suit.

"Mr Killmonger." Coulson shook his hand, smiled at him with surprising warmth. "Thank you for your assistance with that little problem. Your arrival was most fortuitous."

"You're welcome." Looking around, Erik saw the big brother whose shotgun-axe he'd stolen was back on his feet, leaning on the shoulder of a slender Latina woman. "Any casualties?"

"Not of ours, thanks in part to you."

"You're welcome." To his surprise, it felt good to be thanked for what he'd done by instinct. Killing in defence of the good guys? Maybe he was useful for something, after all. His chest puffed up a little higher. Daisy was smiling at him too, and that made him feel even better, as good as the first time he took that crazy heart-shaped herb, almost.

He still hadn't spoken to her, he realised, opened his mouth again to try and speak, but the moment passed as she suddenly hurried past him to embrace another young woman, crying;

"Jemma, thank goodness you're all right!"

"This way, please, Mr Killmonger," Coulson said pleasantly.

"Erik," he said, suddenly uncomfortable with the name he'd claimed for himself. "Erik Stevens is my legal name."

"It certainly carries better associations, but we can call you by whatever name you prefer." Coulson's expression was mischievous. "Agent Killmonger would sound pretty

intimidating, especially with the way you look, and there are times when that could be useful. Pair you with an innocent-looking young agent like Agent Johnson and you could play good cop/bad cop very effectively.”

“I’m pretty sure she’s a pretty badass cop, considering what I just watched her do,” Erik said dryly.

The corners of Coulson’s medium-blue eyes crinkled up. “Keep that in mind and you’ll do just fine with her,” he said, handing Erik a lanyard.

Once he plucked up the guts to speak with her, that is. As he followed Coulson down the passage deeper into the underground base, he rubbed the fingers of his right hand over the inside of his left elbow in an unconscious gesture.

He’d been five when the words appeared, a glimmering silver beneath his skin. His father had been shocked and resigned... after all, his own soulmate was an American, a woman he could not marry because of his closeness to the throne. N’Jobu had accepted that he would never sit on the throne.

Erik had just hoped he’d meet a Wakandan woman who would speak to him in English. It didn’t matter now, of course. Part of the terms of his pardon were his resigning forever any claim to the throne. He was no longer restricted from marrying a non-Wakandan.

Which was good. Since he’d been waiting a long time for his soulmate to turn up.

Gently, he touched the words again, hidden under the sleeve of his leather jacket. He’d been careful never to scar over them, wanting to ensure his soulmate would recognise her writing, just in case there was any doubt.

Glancing back over his shoulder just before they turned the corner, he caught a last glimpse of Daisy. She was watching him, her brow furrowed, even as she spoke with her friend.

Well. At least he’d have time to think up what he was going to say to her.

Two weeks later

“He hates my guts.”

“Of course he doesn’t!” Mack gave her a startled look. “Why would you think that?”

“He’s never spoken so much as a single word to me.” Daisy picked moodily at her fingernails, watching as Erik moved through a training exercise with May. May was overmatched and she knew it, but she certainly wasn’t giving in. Erik had to work damned hard for every fall. Stripped to the waist, his scarred skin glistening with sweat, he was sexy enough to make Daisy shiver a little with delight. Eyes riveted to his every move, she barely heard Mack’s response.

“He’s talkative enough with everyone else. Maybe he *likes* you, likes you.” A huge elbow nudged her ribs.

“What are we, twelve?” Daisy scoffed, and then shot to her feet as an alarm shrilled. Erik and May were right behind her as she sprinted along the corridor to the operations centre.

They’d need two teams, Daisy realised with a quick glance at the objectives up on the screens. Coulson was already making the assignments.

“May, you’ll fly in with Mack and Yoyo. Daisy, you and Erik at ground level. Motorbikes will be quickest; May can drop you from the quinjet.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Erik barked, and Daisy slid a sideways glance at him, recalling that he’d been Special Forces with the US Army for some years. His natural reaction to tactical orders, she guessed. Hopefully, he’d respect hers in the field.

As she left the centre at a dead run to head for the armory, she heard Phil speak to Erik.

“You watch her back out there, you hear me?”

“I promise, sir. I’ll bring her back safe.”

Well, at least he liked her *that* much. Daisy smiled slightly to herself and kept running.

* * *

Coulson barked clipped orders over the radio in his ear, and Erik acknowledged when he could. Which wasn’t too often, because he was thoroughly occupied keeping up with Daisy. She strode through the enemy base they were assaulting, waves of focussed vibration flung out in front of her as effective as a battering ram. He took to running backwards, assault rifle poised and ready, looking for the threat from behind which could take her down when her attention was focussed ahead. If he didn’t see the shooter in time, maybe his body armour could take the bullet instead, as long as he stayed close enough.

Of course, what happened was she stopped suddenly and he ran backwards into her, taking both of them over in a heap.

“What the fu...” Daisy said, and then there was an ominous crack.

“Shit!” Erik was back on his feet in an instant, spinning around in a low crouch, surveying their location for danger before dropping to one knee at Daisy’s side. There was a metal table just beside her, and he realised with horror that she’d hit her head on the corner on the way down. There was an ugly contusion on the side of her head, blood beginning to flow into her hair.

“Coulson, Quake is down,” he said rapidly into his comm. “It was an accident, she fell and hit her head.”

“Can you exfiltrate?” Coulson asked almost immediately.

“If I go back the way we came, yes. I can’t carry her and shoot my way out, though. She’s not conscious.” At least her pulse was strong and steady under Erik’s panicked fingertips.

“The way you came is clear. Fitz has full control over the surveillance and security systems; I’ll put him on to guide you out.”

“Copy that.” Slinging his rifle around to his back, Erik pulled a field dressing from a leg pocket and slapped it on the contusion on Daisy’s head. It would have to do until he could get her to Simmons and proper medical attention.

She was light as he lifted her, and he marvelled yet again at how much lethality was packed into such a small, delicate-appearing form. Her head lolled against his shoulder as he set off back the way they’d come at a dead run.

“You’re jostling me,” a small voice said as he emerged from the building, and Erik heaved a sigh of relief.

“Sorry, angel. Can’t be helped,” he said without thinking, and Daisy went rigid in his arms.

“*What* did you say?”

“Oh, shit.” He thought fast, nothing useful came to him. “I... said whoops, I think I’m your soulmate and this is really not the time to discuss how I’ve been too chicken to speak to you so far? How about you let me keep that promise to get you back to Coulson *almost* unscathed, and we can talk about it later?”

They’d reached the spot where they left the bikes, and he lowered her carefully to her feet. She wobbled; there was no way she could ride alone, and they both knew it. Throwing a leg over his bike, he reached out his hand to her.

“We’re definitely talking about this later, mister,” Daisy said as she accepted his hand and climbed on the bike behind him, nudging his rifle to the side so she could put her arms around his waist and lean against his back.

Her slight weight leaning into him so trustingly triggered the most intensely heart-warming sensation. Taking one hand off the handlebars, Erik put it over hers on his abdomen.

“We can talk about anything you wish.”

Slender fingers twisted to link with his. “Now you’ve found your tongue, we will.” She giggled a little naughtily, and her next words made him wonder if she was concussed. “Though I might have a better use for it than *talking*.”

(Later on, he discovered she wasn’t concussed. She definitely did have a better use for his tongue than talking).

***Chapter 72*: Stephen Strange/Aunt May (AuntStrange)**

“Peter?”

“Just a moment!” Thanking his lucky stars Aunt May had finally taken to knocking and calling his name before opening his bedroom door, Peter took the opportunity to kick a couple of dirty plates under the bed. He’d take them back to the kitchen later, definitely. Opening the door, he smiled down at his aunt. He still couldn’t get used to the fact he was now taller than her.

Aunt May smiled up at him. “I wasn’t sure if you were home.”

“Homework,” he gestured at the open textbook on his desk, grimacing. “Exams coming up.”

“There’s my boy. You always need a backup plan, if... the other thing doesn’t work out.” She wrinkled her nose slightly. “Anyway. It’s the other thing I wanted to talk to you about.”

The last time she’d said that, he’d ended up intercepting an attempt to smuggle a nuclear bomb into Manhattan, so Peter paid attention when Aunt May said things like that. She seemed to hear all the gossip from her friends.

“What is it, Aunt May?”

“There’s another door in the hallway.”

Peter blinked. Whatever he’d expected his aunt to say, that wasn’t it. “Excuse me?”

“Come with me.” She grabbed his wrist, and he followed, unresisting. She led him out of the apartment, leaving the door open, and marched him down the hallway, past the elevators, right to the end.

Where there was, indeed, a door Peter had never seen before. He eyed it uncertainly.

“Is there an Apartment G on any of the other floors?”

“Nope.” May folded her arms and eyed him expectantly.

Every floor in the building had an identical layout. Two apartments on each side of the building, one at each end. Six of them, A through F. And yet, here was a door, looking just as old and scuffed up as any of the other doors, a tarnished brass 4G on the door just above a peephole.

It shouldn’t be there. In fact, its location made no sense at all; if there was even one room behind that door, it would have to be miniscule.

“I think you should go back to our apartment, Aunt May.” Peter eyed the door. “Let me check this out.”

“You aren’t going to call Tony Stark?” Her tone was unpromising.

May had taken a quite unreasonable attitude towards Mr Stark, in Peter's opinion. It was only a *little* fight in Germany, and *one* off-planet trip. *Thank God she didn't know about everyone dying and coming back*, Peter thought privately.

"It's not in Mr Stark's apartment building, is it? It's in ours. Which means it's *my* problem." Peter tried to puff out his chest. "Please, go back into our apartment, Aunt May. I'll come and get you once I've figured out what's going on."

He actually had a sneaking suspicion. The Grand Wizard, as Thor called Doctor Strange, had taken a peculiar interest in Peter right after they got back from Titan. And if anyone could make doors appear where there weren't meant to be doors, it was a wizard, surely.

"All right," May conceded. "But come straight away and tell me if it's dangerous, okay?"

"Sure," Peter lied. If it was dangerous, the last person he wanted anywhere near it was his aunt. She headed back to their apartment with several backward glances, and Peter turned his attention to the door.

There was no keyhole, which had been the second clue that it wasn't a normal door. The first one being the very fact of its existence, of course. No bell, no knocker, no handle. Just the peephole and the tarnished number.

He gave the door a tentative push at the left edge, then at the right, just in case it was hinged the other way. Finally, he shrugged and rapped three times with his knuckles.

Several minutes passed before he heard mutters on the other side of the door. Raising his eyebrows, he cocked his head slightly to one side and gave the peephole a pointed look.

A few more seconds passed before the door creaked slowly open.

"I like the creak. Very atmospheric."

"It was Wong's idea," Doctor Strange said.

"Sure, sure, throw Wong under the bus. I'm betting putting a dimensional door directly into my apartment building *wasn't* his idea, though. Did you think of it, or did Mr Stark ask you to do it?"

"Certainly not!" The wizard looked quite shocked. "He's a *most* unsuitable influence," he continued, before seeming to think better of it and cutting himself off, but Peter had already put the pieces together. He was opening his mouth to tell the wizard he really didn't need a minder when Aunt May's voice behind him made him jump.

"Finally, someone who speaks sense! Though I don't think much of your dress sense."

"Chri- Criminy, Aunt May, don't sneak up on me like that!"

She gave him an unimpressed look, hands on hips. "Obviously you two know each other, so why don't you make the introductions, Peter?" she said, in a tone which was more demand than question.

"Ah, Aunt May, this is Doctor Strange, the Grand Wizard," he stumbled. "I don't know his real name, sorry..."

"Doctor Strange *is* my real name, Peter, Doctor Stephen Strange, and it's Supreme Sorcerer, not Grand Wizard."

"Really? Thor said it was Grand Wizard."

"He also thinks Groot is called Tree."

"I thought that was just the translation..."

"Never mind." With a small gesture, Strange seemed to dismiss the matter, and Peter realised it really wasn't important. He turned back towards his aunt, who was looking Strange up and down with... oh no, please say that wasn't the look of Aunt May eyeing up a man she found

attractive.

Yikes, she looks as though she's thinking about eating him alive.

"My lady," Strange said, and to Peter's surprise he reached to take May's hand before bowing low over it. "This is an unexpected delight."

* * *

May's mouth fell open, and for perhaps the first time in her life, she was completely lost for words. Blue eyes glinted down at her from that fine-boned, handsome face she'd just been admiring, and she realised he must have known for several minutes. She'd said something quite specific... *what was it now... oh dear, I criticised his dress sense.*

Well, in her defence, that outfit was pretty far out there, even if it did look good on his tall, lean frame.

"Uh," Peter said into the electric silence which had fallen, "am I missing something?"

"Go away," May said, unable to take her eyes from her soulmate's.

"What your aunt means to say, Peter," Stephen said, never looking away from her, "is that she and I have just discovered we are soulmates, and it would be best if you returned to your apartment and left us alone for the time being."

"What?"

"Go," May said, pointing down the hallway in the vague direction of their apartment. "Homework. Later. Dinner."

"Is it some kind of spell you've put on her? She doesn't even *sound* like Aunt May!"

"Soulmates, Peter. Go, or I'll put a spell on *you*."

Only peripherally aware of Peter tromping away muttering under his breath, May didn't resist as Stephen's hand closed gently over hers and he drew her through the door which wasn't supposed to be there.

On the other side, it was definitely not anywhere in her apartment building. May looked around, taking in the antique wooden panelling, the comfortable leather chairs, the shelves of ancient-looking books.

"Where is this place?"

"The Sanctum Sanctorum. Still in New York, just a slightly different part of it than Queens." Stephen smiled down at her. It was a very nice smile, lighting those blue eyes and softening the sharp lines of his ascetic face. "Greenwich Village, as it happens. Would you like some tea? Or maybe something stronger?"

"Something stronger sounds good," May admitted. He was still holding her hand, and he didn't let go or seem to reach for anything, but somehow his other hand was now offering her a glass.

"Brandy's good for shock."

She looked at the glass, looked at him. Finally, she accepted it and took a hefty slug of the brandy, gasping a little as the rich liquid burned down her throat. "Huh... good brandy."

Stephen smiled, the fine lines at the corners of his blue eyes deepening, and drew her gently towards a pair of comfortable chairs beside a fireplace where a crackling fire burned in the grate. "I wouldn't offer you anything else."

Taking a seat, May glanced at the glass in her hand and blinked. Was it... *fuller* than it was before? She eyed Stephen suspiciously. "Stop doing that."

"Hm?"

“Using magic when I’m not looking. You don’t need to impress me, and frankly you’re just freaking me out.”

His smile turned a little quirky, and he seated himself beside her, on... the couch which the two chairs had mysteriously transformed into. She narrowed her eyes.

“I’d already done that when you told me to stop. Trust me, it’s more comfortable anyway. And this way, if you decide you’d like to have your wicked way with me, there’s no obstacles in the way.”

He said it perfectly deadpan, but for the glint of amusement in his eyes, and May had to laugh. “Apart from the multiple layers of clothing you’re wearing? What’s this all about, anyway?” She reached out to touch the padded jerkin over his chest, and a fold of his cloak suddenly wrapped around her hand and pushed it back.

“Okay, what the *fuck*?”

“Excuse me a moment!” and Stephen jumped to his feet, retreated to the other side of the room, and seemed to be having an intense, if very quiet, conversation under his breath. The Cloak - May wasn’t sure why she was capitalizing it, but it was definitely a Cloak with a capital C - twitched around a bit before shifting off Stephen’s shoulders and gliding over to a corner of the room where it hung itself up in mid-air.

May decided to not look at it. Picking up her brandy glass, she drained it, and decided she wouldn’t comment if it should happen to magically refill itself again.

“I’m sorry about that,” Stephen said, returning to sit down beside her again. “The Cloak is very protective of me.”

Wordlessly, she held up the brandy glass.

“I thought you didn’t want me to do magic?”

“When I’m not looking.” She cut her eyes at the glass. It refilled promptly. “Thank you.” Taking another long sip, she eyed him over the rim of the glass. He seemed a little at a loss for words, twisting and flexing his fingers. Her sharp eyes picked up the faint white lines of scars all over his hands, so much scar tissue she was surprised he could move them much at all, and with that everything clicked together in her brain.

“You’re *that* Stephen Strange. The neurosurgeon who had the car accident and disappeared... to become a sorcerer?”

“Well, I didn’t exactly set out to become a sorcerer, I originally wanted to find healing for my hands so I could go back to surgery.” He shrugged slightly. “Though technically I could, because I could imbue myself with enough magic to make my hands not shake anymore, I serve a higher purpose now.”

“Dare I ask?”

He fingered an ornate-looking silver pendant hanging on his chest. “Technically, multiple purposes. I’m the Sorcerer Supreme of Earth which makes me guardian of a whole bunch of artifacts which cannot fall into the wrong hands, as well as its defender against magical threats from... other places.”

“Like aliens, other places?”

“Sometimes. Other dimensions, too. It, this,” he encompassed the whole room with a gesture, “it’s a lot to get used to.”

She considered him for a moment before smiling. “I got used to Peter being Spider-Man. If you think a little magic and a few extra dimensions are going to faze me, you’ve another think coming.”

Stephen's smile was warm as he reached for her hand. "I'm sure the Ancient One wished I'd been as adaptable," he said wryly, "instead of stubbornly refusing to believe in magic until she hit me in the head with it. Literally."

May giggled, a surprisingly girlish sound. Her fingers felt light and delicate in his; slowly, he lifted them to his lips, pressed a kiss to her fingertips.

She had extraordinary eyes, his soulmate, he thought as she gazed up at him. Windows to the soul, hers were crystal-clear.

"I used to wear bespoke suits and handmade silk ties," he said in an apparent non sequitur, but she obviously knew what he meant and laughed.

"I'd have liked that less, actually. That's just flaunting status. This, I'm guessing is something in the nature of a uniform?" Her delicate hand landed on his chest; he fancied he could almost feel the warmth of it through his jacket.

"Sort of," he agreed. "A bit like armour."

"Mm hm." Her fingers clenched in the quilted fabric, pulling his face down towards hers. A small smile played around her lips. "Let's leave the rest of the talking for later, hm?"

He was most definitely down with that plan. He was still a man, after all, and the way her soft, plush-looking lips would taste had been a foremost concern for quite a few minutes, now. He wasn't at all reticent about leaning down to kiss her.

Their lips had barely met when a sharp knocking sounded on his recently installed door and Peter's voice said "Aunt May? Aunt May, are you there?"

"Unless aliens are invading again," May shouted, "go and do some more homework!"

Please, don't let it be aliens... Stephen listened intently, heard only Peter's retreating footsteps. Grinning, he wrapped his arms around May. She fisted both hands in his hair and dragged his mouth back down to hers.

