Did electronics have souls? If so, where did they go when they shut down for that final time? Had Dum-E and U been dead after they dropped into the Pacific, before being rebuilt? Only Dum-E was built so far; was U dead? In purgatory? On the great cosmic hold line? If transferring their data into new chassis was like resurrection, was Dum-E as freaked out about it as Phil was? Hell, did PEOPLE have souls? He knew some he was pretty sure didn’t. Should he find a priest for this stuff, or another technologist? Did they make tech-geek priests? If so, could he hire one?

Phil is still gonna smack the next person who goes off on their own, he swears he will. Now they have to figure out teamwork while chasing Hydra, rehabilitating a super-soldier, making peace with their demons and each other, and oh yeah, that team work thing.

This is entirely a setup for an Age of Ultron fixit, with fewer of our beloved characters
emotionally tortured. I'm a giver like that.
Six months previously:

Steve couldn’t face another holiday season like the ones he’d had since he thawed. So at Natasha’s prodding, he took an assignment in southeast Asia with her, where he lumbered around being an enormous white, blond, clueless idiot distraction while she slipped around in the shadows, doing her thing. They were on the trail of a terrorist supposedly operating in the area, Mandarin, or something. “We had nothing to do with ANYTHING” seemed to be the most common response Nat was getting, and he wondered what in hell was really going on, when they were suddenly called back to Washington DC.

They’d been in their usual media blackout, so suddenly having texts, voice mail, and other messages appear on his phone somewhere between Hawaii and Los Angeles wasn’t a big surprise.

Their content WAS.

“Did you know any of this was going on?” Steve demanded, reading another horrifying news account of Stark’s house going into the Pacific, of Stark being dead, of Stark being ALIVE, of Stark disappearing into the Tower in New York.

“No. I swear I didn’t. I knew Mandarin had some targets in the US but I had no idea Stark was one of them.” Nat insisted. “I’ve been on a blackout, too.”

In the two weeks since the AIM-Iron Man showdown in Miami, Stark, Banner, and most disturbingly, Colonel Rhodes, had left over one hundred messages, all a variation of “call us, ASAP, when you’re out of whatever hole you’re in.”

Steve immediately hit redial, hating phones and sucking it up. “Tony, what-”

“Hello, Captain Rogers, thank you for returning our calls.” JARVIS interrupted kindly. “Sir is currently… very busy, but we ask that you come to New York as soon as possible. We require assistance.”

Oh, hell. Tony NEVER asked for assistance. He nuked SPACE ALIEN MOTHERSHIPS IN ANOTHER DIMENSION without asking for assistance. He braced himself. “How bad is it, JARVIS.”

“At this point it is not… life threatening, but your assistance would be invaluable. We can have a Stark Industries jet waiting for you at any airport you arrive at, on your return to North America.” There was a pause. “Circumstances are such that we would dislike discussing them on an open phone line.”

Steve wasn’t comforted AT ALL. “Of course. I’m flying into LAX, I can hop off this flight, there. Four hours until arrival.”

“Very good, Captain, thank you for cooperating. The jet will be ready.”

“Of course. Tell Stark I’m on my way.”

Nat was blinking in surprise from her seat next to him. “You’re really running off to Stark because he asked? With no idea what’s going on?”

Steve shook his head. “He flew a nuke into a portal to another dimension and still would rather have his tongue ripped out than ask for help. JARVIS doesn’t want to talk about it over an open line.”
Between the two, yeah, I think this warrants some attention.”

Nat shrugged.

Steve dialed Fury’s direct line, which he wasn’t supposed to use unless space aliens were flying out another portal in the sky. “Fury, you son of a bitch.”

-A-

The lobby of Stark Tower looked a lot different than it had the last time he’d been there, after the Invasion. Now it was spotlessly clean, subtly expensive minimalist with a coffee bar that didn’t take money (the hell?) and a small reception area manned by a single beautiful young woman. Knowing Stark, the woman was also a ninja. He strode over to her, running through all Natasha’s ‘dealing with modern women, Rogers, you’re hopeless’ lessons in his mind. “Hello, I’m-”

She smiled. “Captain Rogers. Welcome back. Mister Stark has been looking forward to seeing you.” she gestured to a single, isolated elevator on the far side of the lobby. The doors were flush with the walls and the same color; there were no call buttons. You had to know it was there, or look for it, to see it. “If you could use the private elevator, you’ll be taken straight to him.”

For about two seconds Steve was shocked at the lack of security, and then he remembered. JARVIS. Of course. JARVIS and Stark. The entire lobby was probably criss-crossed with lasers. Or land mines. Likely both. “Thank you, ma’am.” Nat had told him to quit calling women miss and ma’am. He couldn’t help it. Though he’d stopped with miss after a young woman told him to fuck off. That had been… startling. Amusing, in a way, but very, very startling.

The elevator doors opened at his approach, and closed once he stepped in. “Captain Rogers, it is good to have you back.” said the smooth voice of Stark’s AI.

Steve still associated him more with the Iron Man armor than the building, but he supposed an AI could go wherever it wanted. Hm. That probably could use some further thought, later. “Hi, JARVIS.” The elevator silently whisked him upward. “Got here as soon as I could.”

“Yes, we all appreciate it. I’m taking you to Sir’s main workshop, where everyone is, if that’s all right?”

“Sure, thanks.”

The doors opened again and Steve stepped out, curious. He’d only been in the Tower the few times, directly after the attack, and had never gotten to see Stark’s workshop. There was an atrium around the elevators, both main bank and the private one, that made a reception sort of area. There were some couches and an unmanned desk. Four spaces went off in four directions, each area delineated by more glass walls. Steve wondered why they bothered with walls at all, then, but maybe it was for safety. Something to do with fumes or germs or other such things? Two of the spaces were completely empty, white and spotless and so sterile they made him shudder. Of the other two, one looked like what he’d come to think of as a standard lab, and the other looked like it had started as a lab before a mechanic’s garage had vomited parts, tools, and dirt everywhere.

The door to the shop, directly in front of him, was propped open with a foot-square cubeish hunk of something melted, metal maybe? Did metal burn like that? Inside the room he could see Banner, Stark, and Barton, who he’d spoken to once or twice on the phone but hadn’t seen since the Invasion. He knocked on the door as he went in, to alert them that he was there.

All three men turned swiftly, braced for mayhem, then relaxed immediately when they saw him. That
wasn’t great, if they were on alert in the heart of the Tower with JARVIS watching over them. “Uh. You called?” Steve said carefully. “I got the message yesterday, sorry for the delay, was on a media blackout.”

Stark looked genuinely shocked for a long moment before his brain started up again. “It’s okay. JARVIS said you got in touch, thanks for coming.”

“Any time.” Of course he’d come, if any of the Avengers asked for help. It looked like he’d need to work harder on getting them to believe that, from the looks on all three faces.

“Have a seat, Cap.” Barton said, kicking out a sort of bar stool from under the table they were gathered around. He pushed over a mug of something hot. “It’s a long story.”

Which was how Steve found out about Extremis. And got to know Pepper over body identity issues and teaching her how to function with a suddenly-stronger body. And learned yoga with Bruce (harder than it looked). And then sat on Stark during his surgical recovery, because apparently his ‘puppy eyes’ were a lethal weapon and could guilt Stark into listening to doctors. Even when Pepper couldn’t threaten him into it. Besides, Stark was always low-grade angry with him anyway, he might as well be the focus of the post-surgical anger, rather than Pepper, right?
A small raiding party.

Chapter Summary

Kate took over. (She had excellent leadership qualities, which both thrilled and terrified Phil, alternately.) “These three idiots-” she gestured at Stark, Steve, and Sam, “decided to do some B and E last night.”

“Badly. They decided to break and enter, BADLY.” Natasha added with a withering glare. All three men looked sheepish.

Chapter Notes

This chapter (and the rest of the story) pick up directly after the meeting scene of "Mixed Metaphors" and refers to that fic, though you don't have to read that one to make sense of this one. This fic is about 100K words long and is FINISHED. I will be posting a chapter a day (barring disasters) until the bitter end. The second half is in progress.

After the first Avengers meeting (that he’d been late to, okay, he’d try to improve that, he hadn’t been THAT late), Tony sat down in his shop and considered. The goddamn scepter was now missing, as far as they knew, with SHIELD or Hydra. One may be as bad as the other; they both liked to fuck around with technology that was beyond them. (Okay, yes, he did it too. Shut up.) The look on Clint and Phil’s faces at the news that its whereabouts were, for now, unknown, that hadn’t been good, at all. The history Clint and Phil BOTH had with that damned glowstick, and what it might be capable of, even worse than it had already done, in the hands of idiots, gave him a major chill. He dropped into his comfiest chair at his main work space and said “Fire it up, JARVIS.”

Before him, holo screens lit, data flared to life, and Tony relaxed the slightest bit. He had yet to run into anything he couldn’t fix, given enough data, and the time to tinker with it. (Unlimited data AND JARVIS at his back? He was unstoppable. Add in the Avengers and Pepper and look out.) “Very good, Sir.” JARVIS said easily. “A quick inventory of SHIELD has revealed nothing meeting the scepter’s description.” More data cascaded, a presumed inventory of questionable hardware, and Tony vowed to make time to go through that when he had a minute. “Unfortunately, SHIELD rarely keeps record of things like this on servers I can access.”

“This is why you’re my favorite, JARVIS.” An AI who could PREDICT, that had been his original goal. He’d gotten damned tired of having to give U and Dum-E specific, in-order, never-ending directions. So he set out to build an AI that could anticipate, predict, provide data or hardware before he even asked. Instead he got what he suspected was sentience, but that worked too. If he occasionally couldn’t sleep at night worrying about the personhood of the computer program he’d built, well, what else did he expect from his life? Robots with souls were still better than all the SI weapons still rolling around out there in the world, waiting to be tracked down or kill him some more.
Did electronics have souls? If so, where did they go when they shut down for that final time? Had Dum-E and U been dead after they dropped into the Pacific, before being rebuilt? Only Dum-E was built so far; was U dead? In purgatory? On the great cosmic hold line? If transferring their data into new chassis was like resurrection, was Dum-E as freaked out about it as Phil was? Hell, did PEOPLE have souls? He knew some he was pretty sure didn’t. Should he find a priest for this stuff, or another technologist? Did they make tech-geek priests? If so, could he hire one?

“Of course, Sir.” JARVIS replied easily, with a touch of humor.

Tony shook himself and got back to work.

“What do we have on SHIELD R&D facilities? They wouldn’t be able to resist fucking around with something like the scepter, right?” Tony gave a half-assed hand wave when Steve - CAP, he reminded himself sternly, when Cap knocked on his door. At the wave, the door slid open.

“SHIELD has nothing in their files helpfully marked ‘research and development’. I am going through each base, and trying to extrapolate from personnel assigned and supplies requisitioned. It may take a bit.”

“On the scepter already.” Cap said with what might be relief. Or approval. Tony swore for the thousandth time he’d quit analyzing Cap’s every reaction to death. CAP. Fearless leader. Brave and heroic person in charge. Not the goof in a ‘World’s Biggest Ball of Twine’ tee shirt and jeans who currently had a kitten riding on his shoulder and hair Tony wanted to pet. CAP. Not Steve.

“I really do not like the idea of it out in the world, not knowing what it and the people around it are doing.”

Cap nodded. “Yeah. Me too. ANY ideas at this point? I know we’re in the early stages.”

Tony shrugged. “JARVIS is thinking. Got any problems with us raiding some old paper file depots from the SSR and SHIELD?”

“Surprisingly few.” Cap answered. “I know you like hard data and measurable outcomes, but I have a bad feeling about this.”

“You aren’t the only one.” Tony agreed. “JARVIS, can you tag Phil and Clint? Ask them down here.” he shifted his attention to Cap again. “They’d know if anyone out at Xavier’s can sense this damn thing. Occurred to me on the way down here, a magic user might be able to find this thing faster than we could, though it makes my shriveled scientist’s heart sad to say it.”

“They are… not to be disturbed.” JARVIS said delicately.

“What’s that mean?” Cap asked. No matter how long he interacted with JARVIS, he still tended to talk to the ceiling, the big dork.

“Haven’t the slightest?” Tony replied. He couldn’t imagine the two of them slipping off to knock boots after the meeting they’d just had, but -

“Sergeant Wilson will be down shortly.” JARVIS announced.

“Is that an explanation on Clint and Phil, or a general announcement?” Tony asked, surprised. Usually he didn’t have to ask JARVIS for clarification.

“...yes.” JARVIS told him.
“You’re getting inscrutable.” Tony complained.

“I apologize. I am not entirely certain of Sergeant Wilson’s… privacy protocols, and do not wish to
violate them. He was most insistent upon them, as a condition of his work as the Avengers’
counselor. Lack of trust would greatly inhibit his effectiveness.”

Cap and Tony kind of looked at each other, considering what that could mean.

“Coffee?” Cap finally asked.

“Yes, thanks.”

They drank coffee, staring at each other for a long moment. Tony started to twitch. He knew he did,
KNEW IT, and still.

“So.” Cap finally said after an eternity. “Raiding file depots?”

“Right.” Tony said with relief. He punched in some code and a map of the eastern seaboard lit up.
“These are the ones I’ve tracked so far.” Ten little dots lit. “We could talk to the Delta Nuts about
them, or if they’re unavailable, and we’re bored, go hit the nearest one and see what’s up.”

“We’ll wait on Sam, then if they’re really unavailable, let’s go look at the one in Brooklyn. I know of
another potential location near there we should check out, too.”

“Old SSR facility?”

“Yeah. Where they did Project Rebirth. I hope to hell they cleaned out any old info, but given the
last month, I’m not assuming anything at this point.”

Tony stared at Steve – CAP for a long minute. “You think they left stuff laying around?”

Cap gestured at the map. “Didn’t they?”

“Sheeeeeit.” Tony let himself mutter, and began hacking into the city grid to check on power draw
for the two places in Brooklyn. Might give them an idea who was there, or if anything was going on
at either place. He was NOT gonna think about more super soldiers, made by Hydra. No. The one in
the Hulk Tank was enough and he’d like to sleep at night. No. Not thinking. Nope nope nope.

“All right?” Sam asked, striding in.

“All right?” Tony demanded.

Sam paused, gave it some thought. “You guys don’t make this privilege thing easy, you know. They
are as okay as anyone else around here. They need some time. Bug ’em tomorrow unless it’s an
emergency.”

That was NOT an adequate answer, damn it. Tony tried again. “Is there anything I can or should do,
to help them out? Do not give me wishy-washy bullshit, tell me.”

Sam smiled at him for some dumb reason. “They can use some time. Otherwise, I think you guys can
put together their history with the scepter and how they probably feel right now.”

Tony thought about that. Cap looked like he was, too. Fine. He’d send them dinner later, and maybe
some… hell, what, fuzzy blankets? Stuffed animals? Barton already had a dog. Pastries. They both
had a major thing for sweets. He could do that.
“Know anything about the mutants out at Xavier’s? Think one might be able to sense the scepter?” Tony asked.

Sam stared at him for a long minute. “Why on earth do you think I’d know that? I wasn’t even here last week to meet the folks who visited.”

“I dunno, maybe someone said something.” Tony waved his hands. “You clearly knew about Phil and Clint before I did, who the hell knows what else you know?”

“Oh. No. Don’t know that.” Sam thought for a moment. “I don’t know as much as I should, actually, because none of you bozos will give me any kind of history on yourselves for me to work with.”

“Hell.” Tony let himself scowl, and thought about all the shit he should probably tell Sam. Dammit. “Later in the week. We need to put together a raiding party, right now. And I’m calling Charles, so he’ll probably be by to visit tomorrow.”

“Charles?” Sam asked.

“Xavier.” Tony replied.

“Right.” Sam rubbed his head. “Raiding party? Am I gonna have to bail anyone out of jail?” He turned to glare at Cap, and that was hilarious.

“Not as far as we know.” Cap assured him.

They both looked blank when Tony laughed at them.

“Look, I need to go in with whoever is going in, like the first place.” Sam explained. “A black dude hanging around on a street in Brooklyn at eleven on a Monday night is gonna get police attention in like five seconds, and stop and frisk SERIOUSLY pisses me off.”

Steve let himself wince a little at that. “I’m the one who knows the way into the place.”

“You can tell us as we go.” Tony told him. “Otherwise, same as the warehouse. I’ll send you a HUD display to your phone. I can’t hang around on the corner either, someone is gonna go “Oooh, what’s Tony fucking Stark doing here? And we’re back to unwanted attention.”

“But me hanging around is gonna go unnoticed?” Steve asked in disbelief. They were sitting in the back of one of Tony’s more nondescript cars, arguing. “We already took a car and driver to a break in, for crying out loud. No offense, Happy.”

Happy grinned. “None taken.” he said cheerfully. “I can take lookout, if you like. It’s like old times.”

“None taken.” Steve said. “You’re gonna be circling the block.”

“You’re gonna be circling the block.” Tony told him. “If anything’s gonna call attention, it’d be a Rolls parked in this part of town.”

“You’ve got a guy that many experts consider one of the world’s leading strategists, and you’re ignoring him and making the plans yourself.” Sam said to Tony in disbelief.

Steve grinned. “His plan is always attack.”

Sam gave him a disbelieving look. “So are yours. What’s the argument, again?”

“Happy, drop us off here.” Tony said loudly, putting on a pair of glasses and glaring at Sam and
“Right, lookout.” Steve sighed, pulling his ball cap down over his head. “If anyone tries to sell me drugs, or buy them, I’m dragging them to the nearest treatment center and leaving you both here.”

“Fair.” Sam decided.

“You two are hilarious.” Tony told them.

“We were kidding?” Sam asked Steve. Steve shook his head. He had NOT been kidding.

“Well, go then.” Steve said, and took a seat at a bus stop, hunching over his phone. Hopefully that wouldn’t get much attention.

“Right.” Tony muttered.

Tony had himself and Sam inside the building faster than Steve had thought possible, and he was grudgingly impressed. “Straight in to the back,” he told them softly, watching through what was probably a camera on Tony’s glasses, transmitting to his phone. “Push that aside, and, yeah.” Sam and Tony had exposed the old elevator doors, and were prying them open. The elevator car had been left at ground level, so that was something, but it looked really dilapidated to Steve.

The last time he’d been in that building, it had been bright and shiny and new. Maybe sitting out on the street wasn’t such a bad idea.

Tony was inside the ‘vator now, and pulling the panel off the controls. Steve watched those deft hands pull things apart and poke and prod. “This is gonna take a minute.” he admitted.

“Quiet out here.” Steve assured him.

There was a zing, of something heavy sliding along rope, and then someone landed next to Steve and dropped to sit. He stiffened, turned, ready to fight, and-

“Hi.” Kate Bishop said. She slipped an arm through his and leaned her head on his shoulder. “We’re just here waiting on the last bus or some shit. Couples draw less attention than single really big men.”

Steve relaxed again. “What are you doing here?”

“I was out for a walk when I saw three really familiar guys break into a warehouse – clumsily, Nat is gonna kick your asses, I took video – and then load a buncha boxes into a car. I followed you here.”

“Out for a walk.” Steve repeated.

“I’m out. You saw me walk.” Kate confirmed.

“What the hell?” Sam demanded on comms.

Steve didn’t want to use names. “Smaller, younger Hawkeye is out here.”

“Uh huh.” Tony said through two screwdrivers and a loop of wire he was holding in his teeth. From the way the video feed shifted, he was probably rolling his eyes and shaking his head.

Kate leaned in against Steve and spoke against his ear. “You guys SUCK at stealth, and I’m telling Nat.” To outsiders it probably looked sexy and romantic. Mostly she was speaking directly into the mic she knew was in his ear.
“We are all gonna die.” Sam said under his breath.

“Yeah, yeah. Got it.” Tony announced. And as they descended in the elevator, as expected, video and audio fizzled out.

Steve sighed.

“Seriously, what the fuck?” Kate demanded.

She was so typical of young women of this decade, and Steve constantly shifted from admiration and glee, to complete intimidation. Well, he’d faced Nazis, he could handle one woman who seemed pretty nice, right? Maybe? “Tony located some old SSR and SHIELD facilities. We’re… going through them… to see if anyone left hard copy.”

“You, and Sam, and Tony fucking Stark.”

“Yes.”

“The three most famous and well-known members of the Avengers. Are doing B and Es in their home town, where they are heroes. Where they have MURALS OF THEIR FACES PAINTED ON WALLS. WITHIN BLOCKS OF HERE.”

When she put it that way… “er, yes.”

“Where in hell are Nat and Clint? And Phil? Who are TRAINED for this kind of thing? And not from New York?”

“We, uh.” Steve decided if there was a good way to put this, decided there wasn’t, and tried to brazen it out. “We didn’t want to bother them.”

“Because getting caught wouldn’t be a bother to them at all.” Kate said skeptically.

Steve didn’t have an answer to that, so he didn’t try.

They sat there for a while, fortunately not drawing any attention. At one point Kate muttered “Put your arm around me, you big idiot.” so he did. He had to say the lack of awe was refreshing, even if the intimidation wasn’t, so much.

Without warning the screen and audio flicked on again. “We’re headed up, Happy’s been tagged and will be pulling around. Be there to help us, we’ve got some stuff.”

Kate rose with Steve and crossed the street with her arm still tucked into his. He was startled to realize she barely reached his shoulder; like Natasha, her outsized personality made her seem much, much larger than she really was. When the door opened, she reached inside with Steve and grabbed some file boxes, and turned as Happy pulled up with the car. The two of them began stowing boxes in the trunk as it popped open, and as quickly as possible, all four had piled into the car and were pulling away.

“Bishop, what the fuck are you doing here?” Tony demanded.

Steve always wanted to reprimand Tony for talking that way to a woman, but Kate always seemed to be amused, and gave as good as she got.

“Saving your ass, apparently. Any more B and E planned for tonight, or are you going to wise up and let Nat and Clint do this like you should have in the first place?”
“The other places to raid are out of town.” Sam told her.

“I assume that means you’ll let reason take over, next time.” Kate told him.

“What the hell crawled up your ass and nested?” Tony demanded.

“I had to fake four separate car break-ins to keep the cops off you in that warehouse, you morons.” Whoops.

“So what in FUCK is going on?” Kate demanded.

Steve wondered if she was some kind of…what, junior Avenger? Maybe? What kind of security clearance were they going to give her? Was she going to be joining in? She already sort of HAD joined in, if the car break-ins were true. And what was she doing, out wandering the city at closing in on one in the morning, anyway?

“We’re looking for something last seen in SHIELD custody. Phil and Clint were taking the rest of the day off and so we thought we’d come over here and see if we should even bother with the other locations we’ve got tagged for possibly containing paper files.”

…or they could let Tony blurt out everything. “Geez, Tony.”

“What are we looking for?” Kate demanded. That kind of answered the ‘junior Avenger’ question in Kate’s mind, at least.

“That glow-stick thing Loki had during the invasion.” Tony told her.

“The one that fucked Clint up and killed Phil.” Kate clarified.

“Yes.”

Kate’s face took on a decidedly grim look that Steve was used to seeing on soldiers. “Right. Let’s go look through those boxes and see what we have.”

-A-

They’d piled the boxes in the Avengers’ private conference room and Kate had pulled the lid off the first one, when Darcy and Pepper showed up. “Dammit, Kate, I thought you were gonna be the reasonable one.” Darcy complained.

Pepper fixed all four of them with a glare before settling on Sam. “I thought SAM would be.”

“I can explain.” Tony said weakly.

“JARVIS filled us in.” Darcy told them. “You are so busted.”

Steve and Tony both started blurt out explanations, and Pepper stepped forward. “All of you. Bed. Now. Tony, not another word.”

They were almost to the elevator, but Steve’s super-hearing picked up “Wanna crash at my apartment?” from Darcy, and an affirmative from Kate. Two peas in a pod, they were.

-A-

All three members of Strike Team Delta had slept the clock ‘round, woke up early, and were blearily
drinking tea and eating random foods in Clint’s kitchen. All their phones dinged at once.

“That can’t be good.” Clint mused.

It was a message for all Avengers and related to show up for a breakfast meeting in the common room kitchen at eight AM. From Pepper.

Phil speculated about what could have gone on while he was asleep for twelve hours, that would lead to Pepper stepping in, then decided whatever his mind could come up with, reality would be worse. “Right. I’m going to go put on a suit; after the meeting, the three of us should go talk to Fury, unless you’ve a better idea?”

No one had a better idea.

He ducked into his own quarters, where everyone stared at him doing the walk of shame. “Not. A. Word.” He mostly addressed it to May and Hill, but the rest could be silent, as well. He was going to ignore how all the geeks, including Leo, were beaming at him joyfully.

Everyone was far too goddamn invested in his life.

Shower, suit, knives and gun, and up to the common floor for the breakfast meeting where-

Everyone was early and all turned to look at him as he walked in. Hm. He glanced around. There was an ancient file box on the table, a buffet laid out on the counters, Pepper looked furious, and Kate and Nat were in a corner, hunched over Kate’s phone. Nat occasionally looked up from the phone to glare daggers in the direction of Steve and Sam, calling them really insulting things in Russian. ‘You aren’t fit to make into soap’ was one of his personal favorites and he tried not to laugh.

Phil reminded himself that he’d thought this job was a good idea for four whole days straight, then went for some food. Clint appeared at his side and said softly, “no one’s talking so I’ve got no intel, but it seems to be focused on Sam, Steve, and Tony. Everyone else seems confused too. I got you a pot of tea, it’s at your place on the table.”

Phil glanced over; they’d put him at the head of the table again. There was a pot of tea there. Pepper was at the foot, glaring, and everyone else seemed to have jumbled in by personal relationships.

“Text that to JARVIS.” he heard Nat tell Kate. Steve flinched.

No one was speaking. Or eating. Which, given this group, was making Phil EXCEEDINGLY worried. He had been on ‘emergency only’ contact since the anxiety attack the day before, and he’d stupidly hoped these knuckleheads had understood what ‘emergency’ meant. It was looking like he’d have to clarify that.

He sat down. He poured tea. He drank. He looked around the table and reminded himself this had seemed like a good idea for FOUR WHOLE DAYS. He marveled that even Thor was silent, though he did look like he was trying not to laugh. Thor was amused by most Avengers strife that wasn’t life-threatening, and with Allspeak he would have understood and enjoyed Natasha’s insults.

“Right, let’s have it.” he said. And the table erupted.

Well. Not the entire table. Tony, Steve, Sam, and Kate all started nearly-shouting. Darcy stepped in to give them hell about being morons, which was amusing. Hill and May glanced at him and shrugged. Nat looked disgusted.
Before he could, Pepper put her fingers in her teeth and whistled, loudly. Everyone fell silent.

Except for Stark. “That’s so sexy.” He told Pepper. From his shift-and-wince, Phil assumed that she had kicked him under the table, pretty hard.

Kate took over. (She had excellent leadership qualities, which both thrilled and terrified Phil, alternately.) “These three idiots—” she gestured at Stark, Steve, and Sam, “decided to do some B and E last night.”

“Badly. They decided to break and enter, BADLY.” Natasha added with a withering glare. All three men looked sheepish.

“We were looking for old SHIELD and SSR files.” Stark said with surprising dignity. Though, he was used to catching hell. “And we found some!” he gestured to the box.

“I had to stage four separate diversions to distract the cops while they were traipsing around a warehouse in Brooklyn.” Kate told Phil. “Then they went and broke into a storefront, even AFTER I told them to leave it to you guys, who are actually TRAINED for stealth infiltration.”

Phil pinched the bridge of his nose, then took another drink of tea, waiting for any of the three criminals to argue Kate’s version of events. They didn’t. Fantastic. “What made this seem like a good idea?” He finally asked.

“I’d traced the locations of some SHIELD hard-copy storage facilities and meant to get into them when I had a spare minute.” Stark explained.

“And last night was your spare minute?” Phil asked.

“Well, yeah.”

“It didn’t occur to any of you three to ask for help? Or wait?” Phil had to ask.

“I went along to keep them out of trouble.” Sam explained, frowning fiercely. “It won’t happen again.”

Someone who learned from past mistakes, that was refreshing. “And you two?” Phil asked.

They immediately started arguing again. Phil couldn’t make out the content, mostly “you started it” and “you could have stayed home” and “it was your idea” and “no, it was yours” and then Pepper gave another whistle.

“You couldn’t wait twelve hours until the specialists were available to steal your stuff?” Natasha demanded.

Both men stalled at that, and Phil could tell it genuinely hadn’t really occurred to either one of them until later.

“All right.” he said with a sigh. “New rules. Number one, if doing something illegal, ASK FOR HELP FROM SOMEONE WHO SPECIALIZES IN THE NEEDED SKILLS. And me. I need to know what in hell is going on. Also try to remember, you’re part of a team now. You don’t have to go out and do things on your own.” The last was addressed at Tony. “I know a lot of you are unused to having good, solid backup, but you have it now. Use it.” He paused. “And have a damned good reason for breaking the law. This one isn’t bad but the execution was.”

There were nods around the table.
Kate spoke. “I have video of the warehouse break-in and would like to watch it with the three criminals, after breakfast, to discuss skill sets and dumbassery.”

That sounded pretty good. Having Kate school them, it might stick in their memories a bit more.

“Did you find anything?” Phil asked, which was what he really wanted to know.

All three men looked at each other. “We don’t know.” Steve finally admitted.

“Pepper made us all go to bed.” Tony added.

Everyone laughed, which was the least they deserved.
Sam got tagged by JARVIS, and went down to his pub, and there was Tony Stark, landlord and builder of wings, pacing with a decanter in one hand and a highball in the other. As he stood in the door, Tony drained the last of whatever was in the highball, glared at the glass, and slapped it and the decanter on the bar. It looked like it was a near thing and he really wanted to throw them. He cleared his throat. “Hi.”

Tony looked at him, threw his hands up, and paced some more. “Ugh. I hate feelings. And people. People who have feelings. Who make ME have feelings.”

“Take this.” Natasha demanded, holding out a small white pill.

Clint glanced at it. “Is that the pill to get out of the Matrix?”

Natasha gave him the Murder Eyebrow and he sat back, holding his hands up.

“Nat, while I appreciate—” Phil began.

Natasha leaned forward, got a bottle of water out of the limo fridge, and shoved it into Phil’s hand. “You are about to face down your former boss and an entire building full of former co-workers who think you’re dead. It is going to be JUST THE SLIGHTEST BIT STRESSFUL FOR ALL OF US. Take the damned pill or I will pin you against that seat and poke it down your throat like I give pills to Lucky.”

Phil sighed. “I appreciate your concern, Nat, but—” he stopped and examined her face closely. No, she wasn’t going to back down on this one. He sighed again. “I already took one.” he told her quietly. He hated admitting weakness, even in front of these two. Maybe especially in front of them.

Clint’s head turned quickly. “You did?”

“The only thing worse than taking an Ativan and feeling like an idiot, would be NOT taking an Ativan and having another anxiety attack like yesterday. And feeling like a bigger idiot.” He damned his stupid body once again; it had never been quite right after he died, but he supposed that was its own kind of normal.

“You swear.” Nat said suspiciously.

“Yes.” Phil had to ease back. Nat normally did NOT do things like this, either the medicating or the demand for a promise. He had to remember she’d been just as wrecked by his death and resurrection as Clint had. “Give me that one, I’ll keep it and if I start getting shaky I’ll take it too.”

She handed it over. “All right then.”

Time to change the subject, dear gods. “Right. We know the plan?”

“I do not say anything, or else, damn it, Barton.” Clint repeated dutifully, doing a halfway decent imitation of Natasha.
Nat grinned. “I jump in as needed but leave you to it.”

“Thank you both for this.”

Clint gave him a truly sweet smile. “Of course, Phil. It’s what we do.”

Hell with it, Phil leaned over and gave him a quick kiss. Natasha beamed at both of them.

The limo came to a precise stop, and Happy opened the door for them. “Sorry there’s no red carpet.” he muttered. He’d used whatever driver magic existed in the city to drive them right up to the front door of the New York SHIELD headquarters. They all got out, and Phil tried not to act like he was on a red carpet. He was supposed to be stealthy, for crying out loud, not take a limousine to the headquarters of his former spy agency.

People were pausing on the sidewalk to stare, and Phil really NOTICED for the first time what they were all wearing. He’d put on a tailored suit, white shirt, and black tie with little purple arrows on it. (He may have ordered it overnight a couple days ago.) Natasha was wearing stiletto platform heels that added six inches to her height, a short floral dress that floated around her and looked extremely feminine, and a jeweled clip in her hair. Phil was reasonably sure the clip had been stolen from the Hermitage on a lark the last time they were in St Petersburg. Clint was wearing a Black Widow tee shirt, and a pair of camo pants with boots. The camo pants were of some kind of needle pattern from an old Soviet Bloc country; Phil had forgotten about Clint’s camo collection. He’d paired it with beat-up combat boots that hadn’t been polished since they’d been purchased/issued.

Clint opened the front door of SHIELD for them, and Phil strode in with Clint and Natasha at his back. There was an immediate crash of something being knocked over, and about half the agents in the lobby pulled out handguns and pointed them; mostly at Clint, but a few at Phil himself. He sighed and shook his head. “Really. You work for SHIELD and are surprised by someone back from the dead?” he asked them all mournfully. Now that he wasn’t Agent Coulson any longer, he could make a bit more free with his personal opinions, and he intended to enjoy it. Might as well find something fun in the damned situation.

“Put down the weapons or I will personally disarm each and every one of you.” Natasha said clearly. “With absolutely NO concern for your safety or future ability to bear children.”

Guns disappeared again like magic. Phil shook his head at all of them again.

Behind him he heard a sort of giggle-cough out of Clint.

“We- we can’t let you in. Uh. Sir.” One of the security agents stuttered at him. “We, uh. You. Don’t have a clearance? And. Uh. Barton.”

Phil had planned for this. He’d planned for every possible reaction he could think of, and for once, people were being predictable. “Well, then, tell Fury I’m here and he’s welcome to come down and chat with me in the lobby.” That would be amusing. He’d be sure to mention something that was Code Indigo.

Nearly everyone in the lobby was speaking into phones, cell phones, or radios at the moment, so he figured Fury would be getting the word any second now.

The three of them stood casually, waiting. Natasha and Clint were putting on a good act, but he could tell they were both strung VERY tightly and examining every twitch and breath for threats. Clint began whistling, and Phil had a single moment to identify “Let the Bodies Hit the Floor” before Natasha punched him into snickering silence.
Clint had always dealt with stress by getting sarcastic, and now that he had no one to answer to? Phil didn’t care in the least. He planned to let him go and giggle along.

The main elevator opened, and… oh, excellent, Sharon Carter stepped out of it. Probably promoted in Fury’s sudden loss of senior agents. She was a good choice; they could work with her. “Hi, Phil.” she said warmly. It looked like she was genuinely pleased to see him. That was nice; they’d come up through the ranks together. “Stand down.” she told everyone else in the lobby.

No one moved. Phil half-expected a tumbleweed to blow through and some western movie music to start up.

Sharon shook her head slightly, rolled her eyes at Phil. “Can you come with me? Second floor secured conference room, if that’s all right?”

“Of course.” The room in question had been installed for precisely this type of occasion: people without any SHIELD clearance showing up and wanting in. The room could be locked down in an instant with the idea of imprisoning whoever was inside, but he knew for a fact that Clint and Natasha had at least three ways – each – out of it. Both of them saw inescapable rooms as a challenge and couldn’t resist.

They followed Sharon back to the ‘vator, trailing agents who fell in behind them as they went. Sharon kept them from following them into the elevator.

“But, Coulson’s DEAD, and Barton… and ROMANOVA.” One of them reminded Sharon, as if Sharon didn’t know more than they did.

“It. Is. Handled.” Sharon said between her teeth, and shut the ‘vator door in their faces. Clint let himself chuckle a little.

“Oh, shut up.” Sharon muttered. “You have NO IDEA the mess you three have made around here.”

“I’ve some idea.” Phil said. “Sorry, but we’re going to make it worse here in about five minutes.” While he had no qualms about making Fury’s life a living hell, there were a lot of agents just trying to do the job who were going to get a pile of shit dropped on them, too. That, he did feel a little badly about. Maybe he could get Tony to send some fruit baskets. He heroically did not giggle, himself.

“Well I didn’t think you were here for tea.” Sharon snarked, showing them into the room. “This is my exit. Tell May and Hill I said hi, and we need to get burgers next week.”

“Will do.” Phil assured her.

He hoped she was the one at SHIELD who got assigned to deal with the Avengers. She could think outside the box, didn’t hold a grudge, and had a sense of humor. Steve would turn inside out, but sacrifices had to be made.

“Think the drinks are poisoned?” Clint asked, poking at some bottles of water.

“Think the room is bugged?” Nat said sarcastically.

Clint threw himself in a chair and put his feet on the table. “This sucks as much as I expected it to.”

“We could make out, give whoever is watching this an eyeful.” Phil suggested.

Clint’s jaw dropped, and he stared at Phil for a long moment before he started laughing. “I’m almost tempted to take you up on that, to see if you would.”
He’d suggested it to make Clint laugh, but… hey, he wasn’t Agent Coulson any more, now, was he?

“Behave, both of you. It’s weird when I feel like the grownup.” Nat growled.

Phil remembered, the last time she’d been in the building was when she’d knocked Fury down and cut his eye patch off. Wow, none of them had left on good terms, had they? He dropped next to Clint and put his feet up, too. “Come on, Nat, sit down, take a load off.”

She glared, but seemed to agree that casual was the way to approach this, so she sat down next to Phil and slouched a bit, though she didn’t put her feet up. “We all should have worn field gear. Make everyone wake up and pay attention.” she muttered.

“NOW you think of it.” Clint complained.

“Next time.” Phil promised. If they ever had to come into this building again, yes, Stark was working on some field gear for him. He didn’t know the reaction to him in battle gear, and out of a suit, would be, but finding out would be entertaining.

They all sat for a moment.

“Think I could make the front door without getting shot?” Clint asked idly.

“Think I could?” asked Phil. “We could film it, make it a training module for the gang.”

“You could probably walk out of here right now and everyone around you would gibber in terror.” Nat decided.

“Ooo, gibbering.” Clint agreed. “I wanna see gibbering.”

“I wonder what would happen if I made zombie groans and demanded brains to eat.” Phil mused.

Clint and Nat both burst out laughing; Phil was pleased. He thought that was the first decent joke he’d made about his resurrection.

The door banged open. “FINE, you assholes, WHAT DO YOU WANT?” Fury demanded, storming in.

Might as well cut to the chase. “The scepter. Loki’s scepter.” Phil dug down and got a grip on his blood pressure and heart rate. “The spear that killed me, Fury.”

“There is no way in holy hell I am handing it over.” Fury answered, turning to leave.

Phil stood. “I have a Norse demigod speaking on behalf of the King of Asgard, demanding to know where it is. They’d like an answer. If you convince us it’s secure, we won’t even take it.” Haha, there was a threat. Stealing the scepter.

Fury turned slowly. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Dare what?” Phil asked. “I have the King of Asgard on hold. He wants to know where it is. I’m not going to lie to him. Are you? If you don’t know, say the word, we’ll start a search. Or we can go to the UN. Thor’s already got diplomatic status.”

If he didn’t know better, Phil would swear Fury went a little pale at that. Hell.

“Fuck you, Phil.” Fury snarled.
“Fury, let me repeat this. Again. It is not coming from me. I am the messenger. Odin Allfather wants to know where the hell the scepter is. I’ve got to say, I’d like to know where it is, too.”

Clint rose slowly, moving like a cobra tracking prey. Phil grabbed his arm, hoping he wouldn’t have to keep Clint from going over the table at Fury. Clint put both hands on the table and leaned toward Fury, still and precise. “Given I know EXACTLY what it’s capable of, your refusal to answer is NOT making me happy. You want me to feel threatened, Fury?”

Clint feeling cornered and lashing out was mayhem, indeed. Especially if Natasha went along for the ride, which Phil was sure she would, in this situation.

Fury kind of flinched at that. He was hesitating, considering what to say, Phil could tell.

“Hell with it.” Nat decided. “We’ve got the resources. Let’s go find it.” She shrugged and headed for the door. “It’ll make a hell of a mess, but after the helicarriers, what do we care?”

Fury held up his hands. “Calm down and knock it off with the threats.”

“What threats?” Phil asked. “I did not hear any threats. Did we make threats?”

“No.” Nat said firmly. “I would take tremendous delight in tearing this place down right now. That is a statement.”

“So would I.” Clint agreed, still sizing Fury up for a coffin. “If I find out you’re trying to use that thing to do to others, what was done to me, I SWEAR I will scrape out your good eye before I kill you. Slowly. With a dull knife.”

Fury dropped his arms, and his attitude. “We don’t know. We’re taking a full inventory, and we haven’t gone through all the bases yet, but so far the scepter is on the missing list.”

Phil’s blood ran cold. He didn’t think he could speak, and knew he was barely breathing. He rounded the table, and Fury stepped aside warily. He was dimly aware of Clint and Nat falling in behind him, and he took the elevator to the lobby and walked out, stepping into the limo, without another word.

-A-

As soon as Nick said the scepter was missing, Phil had locked down. Natasha had let him go, because it scared the shit out of Nick when Phil left the building like that, face frozen, not even a token goodbye. Everyone in the lobby looked terrified, too. Happy, bless him, was still waiting at the curb and opened the door the instant he saw them. They piled in and Natasha immediately went for the pocket of Phil’s suit jacket where he’d put the Ativan.

Clint jumped for... a cup of coffee? as Natasha unwrapped the pill and put it under Phil’s tongue. At least Phil was still breathing and following directions; she’d watched the security vid of his anxiety attack before and that had been terrifying.

“Anything I can do?” Happy asked from the front seat as he pulled out into traffic.

“No, just get us back to the Tower.” Natasha told him.

Phil shook himself a little. “No.” he shut his eyes, took a deep breath, drank some of his coffee, what the hell on the coffee, she was asking about that. Seemed to center himself. “Swing by Mikey’s for burgers, please, Happy?”
“You got it, Boss. I can duck in and get them, if you call ahead for takeout.”

“Chauffeurs may be more useful than I previously thought.” Clint commented, arm wrapped tightly around Phil for support.

“Damn right we are.” Happy said cheerfully.

Natasha pulled out her phone. “The usual for everyone?” They all nodded. After stress, protein loading wasn’t a bad idea. Probably what Phil was thinking, too. “Happy, what do you want?”

“Was there gibbering?” Phil asked roughly, starting to breathe more easily.

“Just about.” Clint said, with the faintest hint of a laugh.

-A-

Since Clint wasn’t there to greet him, and Tony and Clint were the only ones who really knew Charles before last week, Tony went down to the lobby and waited for him to arrive. By car this time, like proper, laws-of-physics obeying normal people. (He didn’t want to hear about Hulk and Mjolnir and all the rest; those were ignoring the laws of physics in ways he was getting used to. Teleporting should be IMPOSSIBLE, okay?) He fought the urge to look worried and pace, because according to Pepper that had a bad impression on executives going in and out of the Tower and she was tired of people begging to know if SI was crashing because Tony was frowning over his latest loss on Mario Kart. (It wasn’t his fault people were idiots, but okay, fine, less frowning made Pepper happy, he could do that.)

Charles rolled in, Logan at his back, and they shook hands. “Good to see you, Charles.”

“And you, Tony.”

They’d raised some hell together back in the day, when their fathers were two of the richest assholes on the east coast and they were both ‘gifted’ (driving their nannies/school teachers insane). Charles had fallen off the grid for a while and when he surfaced – on wheels - he started up a school for ‘gifted youngsters’ at his father’s old estate. Tony had assumed gifted like he was, but no, apparently Charles was a lot more gifted than he’d let on. (Psychic. Telekinetic? Who the hell knew? If he had any of those abilities he’d keep it damned quiet, himself.) He hadn’t understood the urge to throw it all over for a life of altruism, until he’d come back from Afghanistan with a reactor in his chest. Now he got it a bit more. Being on wheels permanently probably also put a major hitch in Charles’ former playboy attitude too. In retrospect, after he got out of Afghanistan, maybe he should have given Charles a call.

“Thanks for coming, again.” Tony said with a grin.

“Thanks for the enormous donation to the school. Again.” Charles said with a smooth smile back.

Tony waved them to the private ‘vator and they all piled in. “Check on Barnes, right?” he asked.

“Yes. I’d like to speak to Sergeant Wilson, as well, if he’s available.”

That was interesting, he wondered what was up with that. “JARVIS?”

“Sergeant Wilson says he will be in his office and you are welcome at any time.” JARVIS replied.

“Excellent, thank you JARVIS.” Charles said easily.
Logan leaned against the wall, crossed his arms over his chest, and scowled at the ceiling. “Great, now we’ve got TWO people who see everything.”

“Oh yeah, JARVIS is really judgy. He spent his first years dealing only with me, so you know, he can’t handle any weird behavior. Just booze. And women. And randomly passing out.” Tony said without thinking about it.

Logan snorted at him, hard enough Tony half-expected to see his hair move around. The elevator doors opened, and hello, Hulk Tank. Barnes and Steve were sitting inside it, on the couch. Outside, May and Hill were both looking fierce in their (not bad) new uniforms and carrying handguns and this was paranoia Tony could endorse. (Assuming they didn’t shoot HIM.)

“I’ll go in with him.” Logan said easily, following Charles to the door, and through. Tony leaned against a wall, watching the men interact. “How’s Barnes doing, really?” he asked the women.

“Nightmares like holy shit.” Hill said easily.

May made an agreeing noise.

“Is he safe?” Tony could NOT believe that for starters he seemed to be in charge of this party, because he shouldn’t be in charge of anything. And then into the bargain, he was rehabilitating the guy who killed his parents. He didn’t know where to even start.

“He’s had ample opportunity to hurt people, and hasn’t.” Hill said with a shrug. “That escape he made, was apparently because he thought Hydra was attacking. When he found out everything was all right, he came right back here without a single protest. And while he was loose, he apparently wanted to find Steve and protect him. We watched security video. Straight to Steve, no fucking around. Got to Steve, and was okay, no violence or sketchy behavior.”

“We’ll see what Charles says.” Tony decided. Maybe that’d make the decision for him.

“I do not like the idea of that arm wandering around the Tower.” May finally allowed.

“We’ve scanned it a couple dozen times.” Tony pointed out. “Though I’m with you completely.”

“Can you replace it?” she asked.

Ha. Funny she should mention. “I’m working on one that’s lighter.”

“And without hidden explosives, bio agents, and other unknowns?”

“I’m pretty sure this one doesn’t have any of those in it.” Tony caught May’s extremely skeptical look. “Yeah, I know. It’s why I’m making a new one. I like known quantities, especially when it comes to complex Hydra machinery.”

“Maybe keep him in there ‘til we can get the arm off?” Hill said thoughtfully, still not looking away from the men in the Tank.

Sounded good to him. “Probably. I’ll talk to Steve about it.” He still hadn’t been able to talk to Barnes directly. For some reason, no one was demanding he do that, so he was gonna roll with that and be grateful.

Tony nodded to Steve (who nodded back gravely, what now?) as Logan escorted Charles back out and into the ‘vator again. “What’s the word?” he asked. This had been as much a safety check as a regular look for Barnes’ peace of mind.
“The serum is truly amazing.” Charles said with something like awe (which wasn’t something Charles felt terribly often, in Tony’s experience). “His mind is processing things faster than I’ve ever seen. He is… dealing.” He glanced up at Tony, eyes eloquent, sad. “He remembers. All of it. Especially the things that most went against his own primary values and personality.”

“He remembers the stuff he was forced to do, more clearly than the stuff he went with voluntarily.” Tony clarified.

“Yes.” Charles said simply.

“Jesus.” Logan muttered as they exited on what they were calling the Public Floor – offices for the Avengers and staff, that were less private than the apartments were.

Tony thought for a moment about having his most-hated actions being his most clearly remembered. Yep, that sounded like one of the inner rings of hell. “So he’s safe?”

Charles gave a faint smile. “As safe as any of you are.”

“Ha. We were going to leave him in there until we could remove the arm?”

“Well, my skills certainly aren’t mechanical.” Charles agreed. “To James’ knowledge, the arm is harmless. He is not lying about that. But, as you have all pointed out including he himself, he didn’t know about the drug reservoirs in it. Removing it sounds prudent to me.”

“He’s not going to… I dunno, go bonkers in the Tank?” Tony asked cautiously.

Charles beamed at him for some reason. “I think he appreciates the quiet and the feeling of safety. While he’s in there, he isn’t putting anyone at risk; that’s his viewpoint. With Steve keeping him company and JARVIS providing nearly any media possible, his books, he’ll be fine for a while yet.”

“Okay, good, great.” Sam walked up and Tony wanted to hug him. “Sam Wilson, Professor Xavier and the orangutan with the cigar is Logan.”

“Uh… huh.” Sam said with a cautious look at Logan, who was rolling his eyes. “Nice to meet you both.” He shook hands with Logan, then Xavier. “It’s an honor, Professor. Your work on abnormal psych has really influenced my own views and methods.”

“I’m very glad to hear that it’s having an effect in the wider world.” Charles said, pleased.

“Right, I’ll let you guys… shrink.” Tony said with a wave and nod. He took the stairs down to the lab floor with the distinct impression that all three of them were laughing at him. He burst into his shop, sat at his bench, and accepted a cup of coffee from Dum-E. Then he breathed. Yes. It would take him about a week to process the last ten minutes’ information and WINTER SOLDIER and yes, breathe.

He drank coffee.

He didn’t notice Bruce leaving his own lab until he was leaning against Tony’s work bench, mildly worried. “Uh, you okay there?”

Tony shook his head. “I just acted like a mature adult. It was horrible. I don’t like it.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“Fuck no, that would be mature.” He turned back to… whatever the hell he’d been working on the
night before, and ignored how hard Bruce was laughing as he went back to his own work.

-A-

Sam ushered Professor Xavier and Logan into the pub. “Office is through here if you’d rather. This is Tony’s idea of a shrink’s office.”

Logan rolled his eyes. “Stark.”

“I have to say, my groups at the VA would have never left if they’d had somewhere like this to meet.”

“Tony is very often correct.” Xavier said easily.

“It’s one of his most annoying qualities.” Logan muttered.

“I would like to speak with Sergeant Wilson privately, Logan.”

Logan shrugged. “I can entertain myself out here for a couple days, easy.” He inhaled through his nose, deeply. “Stark stocked the bar?”

That was interesting, Sam thought. It was implied that Logan was a mutant, and obviously a bodyguard. Sam wondered what his abilities were. “Of course he did. Help yourself, there’s Guinness and some other stuff on tap.”

Xavier wheeled into the office, and Sam followed him, shutting the door, and took a seat in the conversation area. No way he was sitting at his desk like an authority on ANYTHING when Charles Xavier was visiting. He offered tea, pushed the cookies closer, and opened with “What can I do for you, sir?”

“Oh, call me Charles, please.”

“Sam.”

Xavier- Charles- smiled. Wow, he communicated a lot with facial expressions. “Of course, thank you. I wanted to propose a… shall we call it an exchange of skills.”

Sam couldn’t imagine any skills he had that Charles would need, but “Sure. What can I do?”

“You know of my school, the history of the children there?”

Sam half-nodded. Crap, a quiz. “Clint and Natasha mentioned it’s a school for mutant children? He always smiles when he talks about it, I don’t think he knows he does. I’m… not versed in things. But willing to learn.”

Charles patted his hand, sipped his tea. “Kindness like yours is much more rare than you think; I’m glad the Avengers have you to look after them. And I’d like you to extend that circle a bit, to some of my children.” He put down his tea, shook his head. “They aren’t children any more, really. But they went to my school, and so to me…”

“They’ll always be your kids. My momma has strong feelings on the subject.” Sam agreed.

“Yes. Many of our kids, when they leave the school, come here to New York, for further schooling, to find themselves, to make a life, what they wish. It’s a big city, easy to hide in. Colleges and all sorts of other opportunities. And near the school for holidays and support.”
“Smart.” Sam agreed.

“You know of the Viaduct Cafe, in front of the building?”

“Yes.”

“I was wondering if you could choose an afternoon to spend there, weekly. For the children – young adults – who are so inclined to meet you, exchange contact information, know that they have someone to talk to in the city who is a bit outside their own circle, if needed.”

“I’d be happy to, but are you sure you want… well, me? I’m pretty darn average.”

“Oh, I assure you, you’re not, my friend. Please correct me if I’m wrong, but anyone with dark skin in this country will understand about discrimination. Enough to relate to them.”

No holds barred on that one. “Yeah, I guess we do.”

Charles nodded. “I think if they need advice badly enough to go to someone outside the loop, it would do to have a baseline human’s thoughts. I’ve been looking for someone to fill this role for a while, but you’re the first I felt has the needed combination of empathy and understanding.”

Wow. “I’d be happy to.” He’d go to Clint for a list of manners before, to make sure he didn’t stick his foot in it.

“Thank you so much. They’ll all be a little irritated to find I’m still trying to look after them.”

“But they’re your kids.”

“Just so.” Charles sipped more tea, thought for a moment. “Word has gone out, quietly, in some circles that you’re looking for a qualified psychologist for the Avengers?”

“More like backup. I think I’ve got things handled for now, but you know that can turn on a dime and I’d like to know I had someone there if I needed support. I’m a group therapy and talking things out kinda guy; I’m not even a fully trained psychologist yet, and my branch of study isn’t crisis management. Not the kinda crises we could see around here, anyway. I’m not qualified to handle someone in freefall.” Did Charles have someone in mind? That would be fantastic. Talk about a reference.

“I’d be happy to work with you as needed.”

Oh wow. An exchange, he’d said. “Sounds like I’m getting the good side of this deal.”

“So am I.” Charles said with a happy grin.

-A-

Bucky still seemed pretty somber, so Steve was trying not to grin idiotically and punch him in the arm. “That sounded pretty good, right? He said you’re doing well and will tell everyone you’re not a threat.”

“I’m always a threat.”

That was new, that calm, quiet voice. It reminded Steve eerily of Bruce, and he thought for the same reason. Bucky still stiffened at hugs so he sorta leaned over into him for a while. “So’m I, but it’s all relative. You’re not out of control, that’s what matters.”
“Thank God.” Bucky said softly.

Steve wondered if Buck still believed. He couldn’t, any more. He’d lost his faith somewhere around forty-three. Not the discussion to have right now. “Maybe we’ll get you out of here soon.”

“Steve.”

“I’ve got the guest room in my place all made up.”

“Steve.”

He pushed on. “Sacking sheets, rock for a pillow—”

“STEVIE.”

“What? Gonna move to Brooklyn? Chase the Dodgers to Los Angeles?”

“I may still be in here a while. Don’t jump the gun.”

“Why?”

Bucky looked at him, that new, fathomless stare; not dead, but such scary stillness. “I’m not leaving until Stark says it’s okay, and I know he won’t want me out at least until the arm’s off.” He shifted his shoulders, the metal one whirring a bit. “That’ll be a while. The geeks talk a good game, but they’re all pretty puzzled.”

He’d told them to chop it off, Steve remembered. Get a saw, cut it off at the shoulder, and then pick off the rest of the mechanical bits. Jemma, bless her, had shouted at Buck for half an hour about doing no harm and pain triggers and something about arteries, quit being so impatient, oh, men were impossible. Steve was still unsure of the social rules for hugging women, but he really wanted to hug her for that. And because she reminded him of his mother.

“Maybe we can get a deal, you stay here or in my apartment—”

Bucky sighed heavily. “Stevie. I killed the guy’s parents. If he wants me to sit here for the next twenty years, I will. I’m not leaving until he’s okay with it. Guy coulda refused to have me in his building, hell, he coulda had me shot. I expected him to send me off to a falling down cabin somewhere, and woulda gone without a word. Instead he takes me in. No way I’m pushing him on this.”

Steve tended to forget about that, because in his mind, it was the Winter Soldier who killed Howard, not Bucky. But. “Well, okay, but—”

“No, Stevie. And don’t bug the guy about it. He deserves to have time away from my freak show, when he doesn’t have to think about me here.”

“But—”

“Let it go, punk.”

Steve knew Buck had a point, but still. He started thinking about how, if it bothered Tony so much, why would he allow Bucky in the building, really? He couldn’t figure it. Either it mattered and he was doing it for some great reason – one Steve could not see, not in a week of brooding, or he’d made peace with it already.

“Quit thinking before you sprain something, and turn on some baseball.” Buck muttered. So he did.
Later, still thinking, Steve went to find Tony. They’d never gotten along, which was too bad. Tony was – complicated. That was the half-joke these days, right? It’s complicated? Tony somehow managed to stay distant, even through trial and tribulation. Always polite, always doing the kind thing, but never quite connecting. Steve had concluded that Tony just didn’t like him but respected the team, and so went through the motions. Steve tried to stay out of his way in return. Least he could do.

But after Bucky pointed it out, Steve realized, Tony did deserve some thanks.

As usual, the shop door was propped open with the burned metal cube. He’d once asked about it, and Tony had winced and called it past sins in a way that made him drop the subject. Inside, hunched over a work bench, Tony was assembling something, hair in all directions, tee shirt filthy, twist of wire held in his teeth. Dum-E was beside him, his arm curled up around Tony’s side and back, camera-hand cocked over his shoulder, watching whatever Tony was doing, closely.

Of all the things Steve had seen in the future, Dum-E really amazed him most. He knew JARVIS should be more impressive, but JARVIS felt like an extremely intelligent man on an intercom. Dum-E was clearly a synthetic life form, with thoughts, opinions, behaviors, and even body language. It was amazing.

Dum-E raised his head? hand? and chirped at him.

“Shut up, Dum-E, I’m rebuilding him as fast as I can.” Tony muttered.

“Uh. Hey.” Steve said carefully.

Tony’s head snapped up, that startling, intense glare taking him in, then softening and going back to the… whatever he was doing. “Hey, Cap. What’s up?”

Steve lifted his hands a little, didn’t know where to start, and dropped them again.

Tony grunted a bit at that, and picked up a tiny screwdriver, alternately poking at Dum-E and twisting tiny little screws.

Steve decided to jump in and hope for the best. “I wanted to say thanks, Tony.”

“You’re welcome.” Tony said absently, then glanced up. “Uh. For what?”

“Everything, really. You created a home here, for all of us. This is the first one I’ve really had since Bucky shipped out in forty-one. Maybe since my mother died.”

“Oh.” Tony went back to his work. “I’d say everyone made it together. I only created a space; I wouldn’t know the first thing about making a home, myself.”

Steve disagreed, but. “Well, thanks. And letting Bucky stay here, working on his arm… I know that’s about the last thing you want. So. Thanks.”

“You’re welcome.” Tony repeated absently, glaring at his work and batting at Dum-E.

Right. Well, he’d tried. Again. “Good luck with your… thing.” he said softly, and let himself back out.

-A-
Sam got tagged by JARVIS, and went down to his pub, and there was Tony Stark, landlord and builder of wings, pacing with a decanter in one hand and a highball in the other. As he stood in the door, Tony drained the last of whatever was in the highball, glared at the glass, and slapped it and the decanter on the bar. It looked like it was a near thing and he really wanted to throw them. He cleared his throat. “Hi.”

Tony looked at him, threw his hands up, and paced some more. “Ugh. I hate feelings. And people. People who have feelings. Who make ME have feelings.”

Well, at least he was talking. “That’s a common theme around here.” He went to the bar as casually as possible and put the decanter and glass away. Tony didn’t look drunk yet, but why encourage it?

“I really wanna get drunk.” Tony stated baldly.

Points for knowing his goals? “Not sure that’s a good idea.”

Tony gave a short, unamused laugh. “Give me the decanter.”

“Are you really sure...”

Tony seemed to get a grip on himself and took a breath. When he spoke again, his voice was steadier, calmer. “I won’t drink out of it. Just give me the decanter and a glass.” Curious, Sam handed over the fancy container and watched as Tony laid his thumb against the lid to unlock it, then poured a measure out into the highball and pushed it across the bar toward him. “There you go. Have a swig of the special reserve. Then we’ll talk.” He paced again, but more calmly, somehow.

Sam raised the glass to his nose and sniffed, expecting an exotic bouquet of subtle flavor notes of... nothing? He frowned, took a deeper sniff, then a sip. Whatever the hell it was, there wasn’t any alcohol in it. “Is this tea?” he asked blankly.

“Yeah. Herbal blend to look like whiskey because I’m a special little lamb who doesn’t want to discuss my drinking status with anyone.”

Huh. Sam quickly revised about, oh, three-quarters of the things he thought he knew about Tony Stark. “Do you drink at all?” He couldn’t remember Tony drinking anything but his ‘special reserve’ anywhere in the Tower, but they hadn’t spent much time together. The time at the club, he’d tended bar, but Sam hadn’t paid much attention to what he’d been drinking, himself.

Tony gave another not-laugh, came around the bar, and grabbed a bottle of vodka. He uncorked it, poured maybe a teaspoon into a glass, then put his nose in it and inhaled deeply. Then he gagged a couple times and put the glass back down quickly. “I’m an alcoholic who can’t fuckin’ drink. Once in a while I can have a sip of wine.”

“Gotta say, that’s an interesting way to deal with it.” Sam admitted. Was he using some medication for that? To cause or suppress?

Tony kind of snarled, and rubbed his face with his hands.

Maybe he should do his job. Or if not that, be a friend. “Hey man, come on. Have a seat, we’ll talk. At least by the end of it, there can be two of us pissed off about whatever this is.”

Tony shook his head and sighed, but moved back into the pub and sat down at the main table.

Sam quickly made two cups of some kind of hot chocolate Pepper had imported from Europe that might be better than Guinness, and sat down. He pushed a mug across the table to Tony.
“Holy shit, does Pepper know you have this?” Tony took a sip, closing his eyes.

“Am I not supposed to? It was stocked with the coffee and stuff.”

Tony shook his head, took another sip. “Have you ever seen a really heavy drinker quit, cold turkey?”

“Yeah.” Sam tried not to wince. He’d seen it more than once, among his vets. It was never pretty.

“That’s how I quit drinking. In a cave in Afghanistan, with a car battery wired into my chest.” He drank some more hot chocolate. “DTs and booze sweats right after thoracic surgery. No painkillers. With occasional waterboarding. I don’t recommend it.”

Without thinking, Sam reached over, put a hand around Tony’s wrist, and squeezed tight. “Glad you made it home.”

“Me too.” He shook his head, drank.

Sam waited. And waited. For being such a high-energy, manic kind of guy, Tony could sure wait when he wanted to.

“The guy who killed my parents is in a holding tank a couple floors from here.” he finally said. “Every time I think I’ve finally dealt with… everything, all the sins I’ve committed, the hell I’ve raised, death and mayhem for money, the bullshit my asshole FATHER created and left for me to deal with, another one crawls out of somewhere and bites me in the ass.” He drank again. “Guess it’s better than another Jericho missile popping up. Probably.”

“No one would hold it against you if you moved him somewhere else. You’ve got properties all over, we could hide him somewhere.”

Tony was shaking his head before he even finished the sentence. “Can’t. This isn’t over. You know it won’t be over until he’s recognized as a citizen and war hero of the US Government and given a pardon. Until then it’s a waiting game. Wherever he goes, Steve will go along, and I don’t care how good they are, two super-soldiers against all of Hydra and maybe the Russians? No.”

“You’re making the building a target by keeping him here.” Sam had to say. Why should the guy make himself suffer like this?

“We’re already a target. Are you kidding? We stopped… we stopped huge army. The six of us and city forces. I was through that wormhole, saw what was still waiting to come through. We barely got the vanguard. Every space alien in the multiverse who knows is probably thinking they need to kick over New York to get the rest of the planet now. And the Tower is the center of New York, in their strategy, I’ll bet you anything.”

Sam… had not thought of that. “Huh.” How very not comforting. He began to understand better why Tony was always so happy with all the Avengers in the Tower.

Tony waved his hand, dismissing his certainty of further alien invasion. “Anxiety attacks forever, major triggers, that’s a talk for another day. Doesn’t matter. Now is, we’ve gotta rehabilitate the guy and here we are.”

“And you’re having trouble coping.”

“I’m here talking to you, aren’t I?”
“Yeah, points for that.” He should keep cookies to hand out when these guys asked for help. “So what got you tonight? What sent you here.”

Tony dropped his head to the table, laid it there for a while. “Steve came by the shop to thank me.”

Uh huh. “That utter bastard.”

“Don’t you start, too.”

Sam gave him a look, swigged his hot chocolate, and waited.

“Ugh. Earlier today I talked to Charles, Hill, and May about Barnes. We decided to keep him in the Tank until we can get his arm removed. Which is gonna be a while because none of us know how to separate him from it without killing him. For some fucking reason, I seem to be in charge of this project, okay mechanical end sure, but how am I the one making the decision on when to let him out? So I’m basically confining the guy indefinitely, and Steve shows up in my shop while my idiot robot is guilt-tripping me and says he wants to THANK ME.”

So many interesting things that Tony didn’t see. He was damned perceptive about people, but when it came to himself, there were big holes, especially for not seeing kindness directed at him. The reasons for that would probably make him want to buy Barnes a beer for killing Howard Stark, so Sam tried to ignore that for now. “What did he thank you for?”

“Building a home and looking after Barnes and some shit. He was giving me the puppy dog eyes. How in fuck am I supposed to deal with Steve Rogers in my shop doing puppy dog eyes?”

The puppy dog eyes were pretty lethal. Sam had been suckered in himself more than once. “Did he have the kitten on his shoulder?”

“YES.”

“Asshole.”

“Right?”

“So what did you do?”

Tony lifted his head and stared at Sam like he was the one needing a shrink. “Said ‘you’re welcome’? What was I supposed to do?”

“No, no, that works. Then what?”

“Then I came up here and bitched to you and I STILL WANT TO GET DRUNK.”

“You’re outta luck, man.”

“I KNOW.” He dropped his head to the table again.

“So what’s your robot guilt-tripping you about?”

Tony grabbed the change of subject. “I’m rebuilding his… hell, I guess it’s his brother. U. U like the letter, not You like You Idiot. Which he is. They were in the house, when…” Tony shrugged and mimed an explosion and avalanche with his hands. “I recovered them, their bodies? and JARVIS got all their data in a burst right before it all went because JARVIS is a god, and also thinks about a thousand times faster than humans, so I basically built them new bodies and put their brains back in.” His head dropped again. “Fuck. Do they have souls?” He paused. “Never mind. No. Forget I asked
that. I’m not sure humans have souls, and there’s no way we can know and I need to sleep tonight.” He shook his head, hard. “So anyway, by they, I mean Dum-E because I haven’t gotten to U yet and Dum-E is claiming to be lonely even though he’s constantly bugging the shit out of everyone else on the lab floor and has JARVIS and Curiosity and that bitch espresso maker or whatever the hell he is over at CERN and that snooty pain in the ass at Apple and whatever jerk AIs NASA and Google have tried to build most recently to talk to all day and night. JARVIS has taken to trolling Apple and Google, sending them letters criticizing their AI programs, he’s now an eccentric AI expert no one’s heard of, I’m so proud- ANYWAY. Between trying to figure out how to get the Winter Arm off Barnes without a plasma cutter, I’m building another bot body AND doing all my usual for SI. Dum-E doesn’t think it’s fast enough, in part because he’s a bot and his brain runs differently than human ones. Mostly because he’s an impatient asshole.”

Sam wondered how many computer experts in the world would literally kill for a transcript to that last ramble. He tried to get back to the subject; it was harder than expected. Tony Stark on Computer AI was surprisingly entertaining. “And in the middle of that, Steve showed up.”

“No.”

Sam wondered if Tony realized the bots were essentially his kids. Well, dude was stressed out enough already. “So what are you gonna do now?”

Tony squinted across the room to where a clock hung on the wall. “Get my ass upstairs to have dinner with Pepper.” he said, standing.

“Sounds like a good plan.” Sam rose as well. “I’m glad you came to talk to me.”

Tony rolled his eyes dramatically. “Why? Didn’t help.”

“You’re not pacing and raging any more.” And didn’t seem to want to get drunk.

Tony looked around, seemed to think for a second. “Huh.” He shook his head and walked out.

Sam sat back down to finish his cocoa and reconsider everything he knew about Tony Stark. It was interesting work, because he’d already liked Tony Stark quite a lot, but now he was moving into deep respect territory where his momma and Steve resided.

He decided not to mention that to Tony.

-A-

Tony not-quite ran into the penthouse and slowed when he saw Pepper. “Okay, I’m late, but I’m late because I was talking to Sam in a shrink capacity and that should get me a cookie, so can we call it even?”

Pepper had already changed and was laying out whatever the executive chef had sent up for dinner that night. She frowned the slightest bit. “What’s wrong?”

Damn it, Sam really HAD given him a little bit of perspective. Who knew talking about stuff could actually be useful? “The whole Barnes situation. I’ll tell you over dinner.” He needed to jump in the shower; Pepper preferred he not be completely disgusting with grease and grime if they were going to be cuddly, and right now that sounded pretty good.

“It’s okay, I’ve changed.” she waved at her Stark Industries tee shirt and shorts. “They’ll wash. Sit down and tell me, and eat. You probably skipped lunch.”
Now that he thought about it. “We’re leaving Barnes in the Tank for a while.” he explained as he sat and filled his plate. “The arm. So I’m leaving him in the Tank to waste away, and Steve decides to track me down to the shop and THANK ME for it.”

Pepper, who knew Tony’s complicated thoughts on Steve and Captain America better than Tony did, laid a hand on his arm. “It’s the safe thing to do.”

“You’ll tell me if I’m leaving him there just to leave him.”

“Promise.” She leaned over and kissed him. So that was something, anyway.
Chapter Summary

“Are there any mutants you could get in here, who could find this piece of shit? You weren’t here yesterday to ask Xavier, and I didn’t know how to do it without offending him.” he asked, gesturing to the photo of the scepter displayed on the wall.

Everyone had begun doing breakfast in the common room. Every day, everyone got up at about the same time, piled into the dining room on the common floor in various stats of dressed and un, and shared the meal. James checked in by wall screen, and anyone else who couldn’t make it usually did, too. Which turned it into a perfect time for an informal meeting. Darcy loved it; it was more productive than most of the formal ones. People would casually tell everyone what they were doing and remind each other of chores, and give each other grief and laugh. Exactly like a family. She wasn’t sure they realized it yet, so she sat and enjoyed it without pointing it out. They’d get there.

Today she had an agenda, but waited to make sure her target was unoccupied first, during their check-ins.

“We saw Fury yesterday.” Phil announced easily at one point, buttering a biscuit and glaring around the room over the frames of the glasses he wore in the mornings. They gave him a schoolteacher look that made Darcy want to giggle and misbehave. “He said they’re still doing inventories of all the SHIELD facilities, but as of yesterday when we were there, the scepter was missing.”

Shit, that wasn’t good, at all. There was a bunch of swearing around the table that agreed with her.

“We’re up, then.” Skye decided. “We’ll start data-mining on the servers this morning, see what else we can poke our noses into. With JARVIS helping, anything’s possible.”

“I can go through any hard copy we’ve got, and any more you guys get, if you want me to.” Everyone turned to Darcy. She shrugged. “I’m used to dealing with this one’s notes, which she loves to do on paper” she waved toward Jane “and her hard copy is a disaster. We’ve got some office staff, right? Duly sworn in and all that? I can take them, get a start.”

“That would be excellent, thank you.” Phil said easily.

And now she was in charge of old super-secret files probably explaining all kinds of political questions she had about the sixties and seventies. Best. Job. Ever. To celebrate she decided to put into effect her next great idea. “I need to talk to Steve and James after, here is fine.”

Everyone gave each other shifty looks, but no one argued, so Darcy let it roll.

-A-

“What’s this about?” Steve asked easily, after they’d done the dishes. “I’d be happy to help with going through all the old paperwork.”

Oh, that was a good idea, too. “Glad for the help, we’ll start in the main conference room in about half an hour, I’ll put anyone who shows up to work. No, I needed to know,” she turned toward the wall screen. “James, you need Steve with you, all day every day? If you do, that is absolutely fine.
just say the word. I do not judge, especially about best friends.”

“Nope!” James said cheerfully. “If you’re talking about getting him the hell out of here for a few hours, do it with my blessing.”

“Excellent.” Darcy said with a smile to James. “Steve, we’ll go work on paperwork now, and then this afternoon, we’ll go to the Met. We can argue about postmodernism.”

“But, I have stuff-”

“Nope!” James said cheerfully. “If you’re talking about getting him the hell out of here for a few hours, do it with my blessing.”

“Dude. You’ve been in the twenty-first century how long? Couple years? And you’re still having trouble. I can tell. Conveniently, you have me now. I’m your age, or close enough. I know exactly what kinda stuff you should know. We’ll get you up to speed. You might even have fun!”

“But-”

“James?” Darcy asked.

“Stevie, get the fuck outta the building for a while.”

Darcy liked James. She should probably be terrified of him because of his past, but he came across as such a mellow, stand-up guy. Kind of like Bruce, now that she thought about it. “Right. So we’ll meet in the executive lobby at one. See you then.” and she escaped before Steve could argue further. James would take it from there. Now, she had to go organize untold boxes of ancient paperwork. She needed to drop her old library sciences prof a thank you note.

-A-

“I don’t need to go anywhere.”

“Shut up, Steve, a gorgeous woman has asked you out. To an ART MUSEUM. She seems nice, and smart. Your type. Not to mention you’ve been stuck in here with me, it ain’t healthy.”

“But I don’t need to-”

“I will kick your ass.”

“You could try.”

“If we start fighting, everyone will panic and gas us and bring in shrinks and worry that I’m dangerous. You really want that? ‘Cause it’d be worth it to punch you in the face. I haven’t done that in ages.”

“It was forty-two. You broke your hand. On my face.”

“And it was worth it, even if the serum healed your big beak too fast.”

“That is the most messed up argument- Okay, PUT YOUR ARM DOWN, I’ll go, I’ll go.”

-A-

Clint, by request, popped into what was being called the ‘main lab’, which was one of the four on the mad science floor. The other three were specialized for: all kinds of weird sensory equipment and a computer clean room (mostly Jane), biohazard stuff (Bruce, Betty, and occasionally Doctor Simmons), and Tony’s shop. The Main was largest and where, from what he understood, a mint’s worth of lab equipment made it possible for everyone to work together. FitzSimmons had claimed
their own spaces, Skye had a beanbag-filled spot full of computers and monitors, and everyone swept in and out, according to need and project. At the moment, everyone on the science floor was piled in there except for Darcy.

He hoped he wasn’t going to spend the day checking math.

“What’s up?” he asked.

Tony, as usual, jumped right in. “Are there any mutants you could get in here, who could find this piece of shit? You weren’t here yesterday to ask Xavier, and I didn’t know how to do it without offending him,” he asked, gesturing to the photo of the scepter displayed on the wall.

Huh. That WOULD be faster than just about any other method, but. “Not sure. I can think of one, but he disappeared about twenty years ago, I’ve never met him. There’s another... maybe. Maybe.” He’d need his parent’s permission; he was one of the few kids at Xavier’s school whose parents were still involved in his life, and even in a loving way. Charles worked to include them as much as possible. “Let me make some calls.” He ducked out to the sort of entry, where there was something like a reception area. The desk, always empty before, now held some computer equipment, a phone, and other office junk. He took a seat on the back of a couch instead, and pulled out his cell.

“What.”

Ah, Logan was his usual cheery self. “Y’all have anyone up there who could locate a chunk of metal? Like a specific one, not random?”

“...maybe. Is it lost?”

“Well, I’m sure someone knows where it is, but it’s lost to us.”

“I assume this is end of the world shit, or some weapon you’re looking for.”

“Kinda, yeah.”

Logan seemed to think for a while. “I’ll call you back tonight. If he’s willing to do it, we’ll be by tomorrow morning.”

“Fair enough, thanks.”

Logan grunted and hung up.

Clint went back to the lab. “They might have someone, they’ll call me and let me know tonight. If so, they’ll be here tomorrow.”

Everyone sort of nodded.

“It will most likely be a kid. Show some respect if a ten year old shows up. They’re here to help.”

Everyone nodded again.

Bruce waved him over. “Help me with this algorithm.”

Clint sighed. “Let me get a drink, first.”

-A-

She couldn’t help it. She’d spent too much time strategizing even the smallest interactions with men
in the corporate world. Clothes, carriage, tone, vocabulary, even what heel height and what to eat. So when Pepper felt even the slightest bit put off balance or surprised, she was back to checking the lines of her suit and making sure her hair was smooth.

Maybe she’d mention that.

Probably not.

She stood as Sam entered the restaurant, held out a hand and kissed a cheek in greeting. That too was a message sent; the most powerful person in the restaurant was indeed happy to have lunch with the black guy in khakis and a button-down without a tie, and don’t even begin to start having a problem with it. Corporate America was far, far too white. And male. She was working on it. “Thanks so much for humoring me and coming out for lunch.”

“No problem.” Sam said easily, waiting for her to sit before he seated himself, nodding to waiters, and quietly ordering a sparkling water.

Pepper felt... kind of bad. Sam got into this by following Captain America into war. He didn’t sign up for running with corporate power. “I thought we should talk, and wanted to do it where I feel comfortable. I didn’t think how it would make you feel.”

Sam smiled a little at that. “I’ve slept on rocks, I can handle someone bringing me food.”

He truly was kind. “I’m so glad you joined our merry band.”

“Oh, well. Captain America needed my help. You know how he is.”

“His superpower is getting people to do things against their better judgment.”

Sam laughed at that. “It really is.”

Pepper waited through the ordering, serving, and small talk. She waved away the waitstaff, and they disappeared. “The reason I use this restaurant is, Tony backed it. They let him in before they decorated, and the walls in this corner make surveillance impossible.”

Sam laughed and shook his head. “So you bring competitors here and they relax ‘cause they’re out in public and you use the advantage to crush them under your stylish, well-fitting heel.”

“...something like that. At any rate, this area is much more private than it looks.”

Sam nodded, looked politely expectant, and waited, eating slowly.

He’d do well as one of her negotiators. She wondered if he’d be willing to do some for fun. “Tony mentioned he spoke to you yesterday.”

Sam nodded. “Privilege and all that, but I can confirm.”

“And you’ve wanted backgrounds on all of us.”

“It would be helpful.”

Damn it, he wasn’t giving away ANYTHING. “You want a job doing negotiations for me?”

He smiled, that wide, easy smile that drew people in. “Good to have a fallback.”

Pepper shook her head. “My childhood was pretty normal. I mean, I was orphaned early – car
accident – and raised by my aunt, but it was a solid, stable childhood. Worked hard, got into college on a scholarship, worked harder, you know. Been a workaholic my entire life. I went to work at Stark Industries straight out of school. Accounting degree, CPA, art minor. I got a job in the tax division, mostly keeping Tony’s ass out of the fire with the IRS. After a while, I was the only person dealing with his receipts because everyone else was driven insane by them."

“So that started early.”

Pepper smiled and shrugged. “Probably at birth. He’d been at it long before I got there. He owned the place. To this day I don’t know what they thought they were doing, judging his expenditures. His place, his rules. The way he is now with money? That hasn’t changed. He’d be as likely to spend five hundred dollars on a bottle of wine, or pay off his bartender’s car. He’s always been that way, as far back as I’ve known him. Rhodey says he did it when he was a kid at MIT, too. Rhodey’s student loans would mysteriously disappear; Rhodey would sign them, and within days no one had ever heard of them but his tuition was full up. When we met he always carried a roll of fifties for tips. Like for tipping a barrista. Since the economy slump in ‘08 he’s started carrying hundreds.”

“He’s an interesting guy.”

Pepper nodded. “So, I caught an error, sent it over to his place. Came back fixed. Didn’t think anything of it. Couple months later, same thing. After that, the errors seemed to pick up speed. Multiplied like rabbits.”

“He was testing you?”

“Probably. Eventually the errors got so ridiculous I wrote a note to his PA, told them they needed a few remedial courses in accounting and if all else, stop by and I’d go over what was and wasn’t appropriate to write off, and how. I might have been a little snide.” She’d been a lot snide, and damned irritated. The receipts had been FINE when she’d started, then suddenly gone to hell about six months in.

“The PA took it personally?”

“There wasn’t a PA. They couldn’t find one who’d put up with Tony for a full week. He’d been doing them himself for years; they had suddenly gotten messy because he wanted to poke at the person who dared correct his math.”

Sam laughed.

“Of course I didn’t know any of this. I just knew there were idiot receipts that needed fixed. Until one afternoon the accounting department suddenly… erupted, it was like a volcano, I swear, and there’s the man himself, Tony Stark, demanding to see whoever the hell V Potts was about his accounting. He’d come straight from his shop, old tee shirt, ripped jeans, covered in grunge, smelling like smoke. Everyone was terrified, but I was so fed up with all the receipt nonsense, I didn’t really think about it. I stood up, walked over, and said yeah, that was me, and what did he want?”

“The start of a beautiful friendship.”

Pepper had to smile. “Not at first. Not for a while, actually. We snarled at each other in the office, everyone else horrified. I know at one point I told him he could do advanced physics, so I didn’t know why he couldn’t add up his bar tab. Everyone around us gasped. Tony gave me that look. You know.” she made her face completely neutral and her eyes as intense as possible, and looked at Sam.

“Yeah, I’ve seen that one, too. It’s like he can see into your actual brain.”
“He probably can.” Pepper sighed, went back to her salad. “So it was decided, mostly by Tony – Mr. Stark at the time – that I’d go over to his house one day a week to sort his ‘tiny slips of paper’ and we both sneered ‘fine’ at each other and walked away. That’s when he started calling me Pepper. I let it ride because it was less offensive than a hundred other things I’d already been called in the corporate world. Hell, compared to some it was a compliment.”

“How long did your weekly visits last?”

“About two weeks. Until I spotted the art collection, and started taking another day every other week to try and curate the damn thing. He couldn’t even remember where he’d bought some of it, so provenance was a nightmare. He’d see something he liked in an alcohol haze, buy it, and not remember when it turned up in a crate on his doorstep. Even blitzed, he had – has – excellent taste in modern art.”

“And before you knew it?”

“Yeah, within another six months, I was informed that I was Mr Stark’s PA and my salary was quadrupled. I only agreed to it if I got to design and build my own office in the mansion, and a six month severance package with a guaranteed good reference if I left. He gave me carte blanche on the office. I swiped several of his modern pieces from the rest of the house and hung them in there. At the time I didn’t think he noticed.”

“He knew.”

“Absolutely. And let me do it. Then he told me to find some art to fill the empty hangers in the main house, how could he have empty hangers? I offered to find something in storage or on loan, but he said no, go buy some stuff.”

“And you got a blank check to buy art?”

“Pretty much.” Pepper wondered how much she should tell Sam, then considered how he’d come to be with them in the first place. To hell with it. “It was all pretty seductive. Anyone who wanted to talk to Tony Stark had to go through me. I had, literally, a blank checkbook and a rubber stamp with Tony’s signature on it to do anything I wanted. Recently he told me he’d watched the account like a hawk, waiting to see when I started ripping him off. I never did. I might have bought exorbitant things or birthday presents for myself, but I always told him about it and sent him the receipts. That’s how I earned his trust, more than anything else. With a blank check.”

“So the ethics never bothered you?”

Pepper winced a little at that. “Well, at the time, we both thought we were arming America and its allies. I think Tony saw some of the bigger picture, and that’s what the booze, women, and drugs were about. But for me, I considered it like any another industry for a long time. I wasn’t twenty-five yet when I started working there, and came from a sheltered background. There was a lot of idealism, with me. I only began to suspect something was up about six months before Afghanistan. Even then, I didn’t have anything remotely concrete, just Obie being creepier than usual, to go from.”

“Did you ever wonder if you were made PA because you were too smart to leave in the main accounting department?” Sam asked.

Oh, it was nice to deal with intelligent people. “Not at the time, of course, but since? I’ve lost some sleep over it. It’s exactly the kind of thing Obie would do. Take the really sharp, really honest accountant, put her in charge of an art collection and a crazy alcoholic, let them drive each other nuts,
and do what he wanted in the shadows. Thing is...” she wanted a drink. This stuff was hard. “The thing is, I don’t think Obie got away with much, until I stepped in. With me running Tony’s affairs, Tony dug into his shop and his social life and quit paying as much attention to Stark Industries. I think the two of us working together is what made it possible for Obie to go off the deep end.”

“It’s not like you pushed him in. He made his own choices.”

“He really did. And he had a LOT of other choices than the ones he made.” Pepper waved down someone and ordered a martini. This was going to be harder than she’d thought. She took a big drink, ordered a second before the waiter could leave. To hell with her reputation.

Sam ordered a glass of wine, probably to keep her company and she could make SUCH a corporate raider out of him.

“And then Afghanistan.” Pepper munched her olive, waiting for the entree and the second martini. “We were almost sure he was dead. Me and Rhodey. The only reason we had hope was because we thought they’d publicize an execution and we hadn’t heard anything. We were the only ones who cared.” She shook her head. “I’d tried to distance myself from Tony, make him just a job as much as possible, so I hadn’t really dug into his personal background like I should have. But he got taken, and everyone said ‘oh that’s too bad’ and that was it. I couldn’t believe it. Rhodey and I were the only ones actively upset. Well, and Ms A, Tony’s actual secretary. She was concerned too, but probably not losing sleep like Rhodey and I were. But there we were, the only two people in the world who really cared if he lived or died. Him, Tony Stark, not the genius or the owner or the boss.”

She took a moment, ate some more.

“He went to Afghanistan a really annoying, juvenile, genius playboy, and came home a man.” Pepper finally said. It was the only way she could sum it up. “I know that sounds melodramatic, but-”

“It really doesn’t. I’ve seen what a tour of duty can do to a guy. But whatever he became, the start of that was already in him.”

Pepper beamed at him. Yes, it was so nice to deal with smart people. “Exactly. I think surviving that made him see how strong he really is, and now that he knows...” she had to smile again. “Well, here we are.”

“Due in great part to Tony Stark.” Sam said easily. He didn’t seem to resent Tony like so many people did, which was a very nice quality in someone she had to live with.

“I never would have gone near Tony the playboy. We were cautious friends, but that was it. It was Afghanistan that turned him into someone I respected, someone I eventually fell in love with. Without the one, I wouldn’t have the rest. That also keeps me awake some nights.” She stared into her food and poked it around for a while.

“All you did was respond to events around you, right?” Sam asked. “You even responded in positive ways.”

Pepper thought about that. Maybe. They’d talk about that another time. But maybe.

“It was kept very quiet, but Obie is the one who had the Afghans kidnap Tony. He’d been selling arms to anyone who’d pay, and even then with the booze and women, Tony and I couldn’t miss the evidence of THAT forever.”
Sam looked shocked at that. “Did Tony know?”

“Yes, soon after he came back. I can’t give you all the details, because it’s not my story to tell.”

“I understand.”

She bet he did. “But Obie didn’t die in a plane crash.”

“I never thought he did.” Sam agreed. “The timing was way too damned convenient. That huge fight in LA, huge shakeups at SI, and all of a sudden, he’s dead? Not of natural causes. I always wondered, was that him in the other Iron Man suit, that night? I saw the news footage after, and there were rumors in the military.”

“Yes. It was. Tony and I overpowered the main arc reactor at SI, Tony got him onto the roof, and I pulled the trigger.” Pepper looked Sam in the eye, to make sure he was getting this. “In that suit he was wearing, he was damned near indestructible. There weren’t many options. Tony and I together killed Obadiah Stane.”

Sam nodded. “I appreciate you telling me. It’s a job well done.”

Pepper laughed a little. What other answer did she expect from a soldier? “Let’s say it changed my views a lot. On everything, not just Tony, although I finally owned how I was enabling his self-destructive behavior and tried to quit that. Oh, THAT was a process. And a brawl. Afghanistan didn’t change only him. I came away a lot tougher and more cynical and ruthless, too. He thought he was dying, after, and gave me the CEO job. I think it was because I was the only one he trusted to look after the company, and follow his plans for it.”

“And you have.”

“And I have.” They’d finished eating a while ago. She took a deep breath. This seemed like a good place to stop. “There’s some background for you. Maybe another time I’ll tell the story of how Tony and I wound up together.”

They rose, and Sam easily offered her his arm. She hooked hers through it.

“Were there explosions?” Sam asked.

“So many explosions.” she agreed, and let herself laugh out loud as they crossed the sidewalk to where Happy waited with the limo.

-A-

Phil caught up with him the next morning, standing in the executive lobby. “I hear we’re having guests.”

Clint nodded. “We’ll see if we can find the scepter the easy way.”

“Think it’ll work?”

“I have no idea. When it comes to mutants, anything’s possible, and if they’re bringing who I think, his abilities are still forming and not well understood.”

Phil nodded, and they waited a long moment. The door opened and Logan walked through, holding the hand of a small, dark-haired boy wearing a red tee shirt and black jeans. When he spotted Clint and Phil, he smiled delightedly, let go of Logan, and ran straight for them. He jumped for Phil before
Clint figured out what he was doing, and thankfully, Phil caught him and stood, one arm under the kid, kid hugging him tight. “Hi, Billy.” Clint said, trying to help Phil out. Phil gotten that look on his face when his memory was failing him; Clint was getting pretty good at recognizing it and filling in blanks.

“Hi, Clint!” The kid said easily, and turned back to Phil. “We were all so glad to find out you’re not dead!” He hugged Phil tight – Phil patted his back gently – and kissed Phil on the cheek. Then he sort of froze, leaned back a little, and looked Phil in the eyes. “You don’t remember me.”

Phil sighed. “No, I don’t, I’m so sorry. It was part of them raising me from the dead.”

“I’m still glad you’re okay. Thanks for catching me.”

“You’re very welcome.” Phil said, more easily than Clint was expecting.

Clint stepped in to ease the awkwardness. “Walk or ride, kid?”

“Ride!” Billy said with a laugh, and leaned away from Phil. Clint plucked him out of the air and propped him on a hip, Billy’s arms wrapping around his neck.

“How old are you now? You’re gonna be too old to pull this stuff, sooner or later.” Clint reminded him.

“Nine, but I look six. I can work it a while longer.” Billy said confidently.

Phil laughed. Logan shook his head.

Billy was more discreet than most kids his age, and he waited until they were in the elevator before he said “What am I looking for?”

“A spear sort of thing with a gem in it.” Clint told him.

“Do I get pictures?”

“Yeah, we can get you photos. And Thor will be there to talk to, if you have any questions. Of all of us, he might be able to answer.”

“I get to meet THOR?”

That was the thing Clint loved about kids; they were all kids, under the rest. “Sure.”

They walked into the main lab, Billy still on Clint’s hip, and he could immediately see shifty eyes and concern about such a little kid being there. They’d mostly cleared the place out, not wanting to overwhelm Billy, but Darcy and most of the science crew were there, as well as Thor and Tony. Clint was getting ready to give some people hell, when Tony happened.

Tony had been in his shop several hours by then, and so looked like he’d been under a car for a couple days. He strode up to Clint and said “Hey, thanks for coming. Call me Tony.” He held out a hand, as easy and serious as he acted when meeting corporate raiders and presidents.

Billy sat up a little straighter and shook hands. “Hi. I’m Billy. The gaming capabilities on the latest StarkPhone are OP.”

Tony grinned. “Always nice to meet a fan. Thanks for agreeing to help us out, we appreciate it. What do you need, to work with?”
Billy wriggled a little, and Clint put him down. He walked a loop around the lab, then climbed up onto one of the stools around the main table. Clint saw Fitz reach over to steady the stool with his foot, but otherwise not shift in expression. “This is fine.” Billy decided. “I need pictures, information, whatever you’ve got on this spear thingie. And paper maps? I can use electronic if I have to, but paper would work better.”

“There’s an atlas in the library upstairs, would that work?” Darcy asked him.

“Yes, that would be fine, thanks.”

Darcy took off for the elevator, and Clint went to lean against the table, ready to help. Or catch the little booger if he overbalanced on the stool.

“Our digital library is at your disposal, young Billy.” JARVIS said, and spread icons, photos, and video stills all across the table.

Billy’s head snapped up, and Clint grabbed him right before he fell over. “Who are you?” Billy’s eyes were a little wide, and Clint hoped he didn’t panic. That could be bad. The kid had all sorts of extra senses they hadn’t even categorized yet, and who knew what he was getting off JARVIS.

“I am JARVIS, Mister Stark’s AI.”

“A computerized life form.” Billy said, a little hushed.

“Quite.”

“Holy…” Billy paused, looked at Clint, and then Logan. “…crow. Nice to meet you, Mister Jarvis.” He bent over the table, and began flipping through images, sometimes zooming in or out, and running videos. He was at it quite a while, and people began drifting away to their own work, keeping an eye on him. They seemed more bemused than anything else; Billy was a small and looked even younger than he was.

Tony in particular was regarding Billy with serious eyes. “What do you drink, kid?” He finally asked.

Billy glanced up at Tony, then back at Logan. “Soda?” he seemed to ask them both. Logan shrugged. “Soda, please.” Billy said more definitely.

“Nothing with caffeine in it.” Logan added.

“You’re no fun.” Billy muttered.

“Remember the tennis court.”

Billy grinned, very slightly, and went back to closely inspecting photos, giving Tony an absent thank you when his soda arrived. “Who’s the black-haired guy, here?” he asked, pointing to a photo taken during the Invasion.

“My brother.” Thor said without inflection.

“Oh.” Billy thought about that. “I’m sorry.” he told Thor.

Thor gave him a polite half-bow that Clint had seen him give heads of state. “Thank you, Master William.”

Clint had a feeling that ‘master’ was meant in the literal sense, not the sense Midgard used it, as a
casual title for young kids. Billy had some serious power, and hadn’t really grown into it yet, so he wondered what Thor was sensing.

Finally Billy sat back a little bit, and got more serious about drinking his soda. He looked thoughtful, and turned to Clint. “Is this the thing, that-”

“That zapped me. Yeah,” Clint finished for him.

“Do we know what the gem stone thing is made out of?”

Everyone turned to Thor. “We do not. Even my people do not fully understand its workings.”

Billy nodded, thought some more. “Okay.” He said finally. “The atlas?”

“Here.” Darcy said, stepping forward and laying a large, hardcover book down on the table. “It’s the most recent one I could find. Mister Technology over there” she jerked a thumb at Tony “sneers at paper copy. But the land masses will be accurate, even if some of the political boundaries have changed. Does that work, or would you like us to go out and get a current one?” Darcy, as always, was rolling with it. After space aliens and the Destroyer, she could handle one polite kid, and was doing it with her usual calm competence.

Billy blinked a little bit at her, and opened the book. Beautiful topographical maps slipped through his fingers as he turned the pages. “Oh, this is really nice. It’ll work great, thank you.”

“No problem. Say the word if you need anything else.” She looked at Logan. “Soda refill?” Logan shrugged, so she got him another, this time in a cup with ice with a straw.

“Table’s slate, right?” Billy asked the room at large, knocking on it.

“Yep. Old school lab bench.” Bruce confirmed.

Billy pulled the ever-present chalk out of his pocket, and started drawing. Clint had seen him do this stuff before – at the school he had to have a teacher’s permission, but he figured that’s what Logan was doing, as much as offering bodyguard and parenting services. Billy said he had to hear his spells, so he hummed or sang. This time the humming was VERY quiet, but he was pretty sure it was “Mister Roboto”, and given Tony’s slight grin, that’s probably what it was.

“Mister Jarvis, can you please project a picture of the scepter into the center of the circle?”

“Of course.”

The picture flicked on, and Thor frowned slightly. “Does that work, as a focal point?” he asked curiously.

Billy looked up at him, eyes dancing. “It works if I think it will.”

“Ah. Indeed.” Thor agreed with another slight bow and a smile.

Billy placed a finger on the outer circle and it began to spark slightly, glowing gently blue. Continuing to hum, he flipped through the atlas a couple times, slowing down when he came to Europe. Then he slowed down further and went through Europe again several times. Eventually he centered on a page of Eastern Europe and quit humming. The circle sparked out.

Clint found the whole thing interesting, because the last time he’d seen it done, there had been a couple other kids involved and he’d been in the center of the circle.
“Mister Jarvis, please turn off the picture?” It winked out. “Thank you. Can I have a wet cloth of some kind?”

“Does a bleach wipe work?” Bruce asked. When Billy nodded, he handed over the can.

Billy took a good while, and a couple bleach wipes, cleaning up every tiny speck of chalk. Everyone waited patiently, which was good. Clint had been told once that cleaning up the chalk was part of ending the spell.

Natasha slipped up behind him. “How are we doing?” she asked quietly.

“I think he got something.” Clint murmured.

“I did but I didn’t.” Billy answered absently. “Hi, Nat.”

“Hi, Billy.” Natasha said warmly. Little known fact: Natasha Romanov liked kids, the more attitude, the better.

Eventually, Billy sat back down on his stool, and drank again, waving for Clint to come over. Everyone else took that as permission to gather around. “I have… well, bad news and not so bad news.”

“Right now we have no idea where to look, so any information you have would be helpful.” Nat told him easily.

Billy kind of shrugged, suddenly mature beyond his years, and very tired. “Well. The, crystal thing.” he looked up at Thor. “Do your people know what it is?” Thor nodded, and Billy shook his head at him. “It doesn’t belong here. Like, on earth. It’s not ours and it’s… messing stuff up. Space and time. And I can’t sense it. Given the mess it’s made, how it’s still warping things, I darn well ought to. I don’t know if it has the ability to mask itself, or if it’s a void, or what. It just isn’t there to be found. Not by magic.” He looked up at Tony, and then Bruce. “You know how science can’t prove a negative?” they both nodded. “This is like trying to find a shadow with a flashlight.” He glared down at the table. “Kind of annoying, actually.”

Everyone deflated a little bit.

“But the metal bit.” Billy smiled slightly. “I’m not too bad at sensing metal. It’s out there, and I can feel it, but they’ve got someone… hiding it? Shielding it? Something like that. Another magic user, pretty strong; whoever they are, they’re using the same wavelength as I am, which makes it hard for me to push back against. English isn’t great for explaining magic.” He held a hand over the map, drew a circle with his finger, that JARVIS echoed with light. “That’s really cool, Mister Jarvis, thanks. Yes. It’s in that area. I could probably pinpoint it further, but it would take stronger magic that I’m not allowed to use.” he shot a sidewise glance at Logan.

“Still aren’t.” Logan confirmed. “Remember the tennis court.”

Billy about half-smiled. “I will never hear the end of that tennis court. Since I couldn’t pinpoint the scepter very well, I tried to sense surrounding conditions. If it was in a lab like this, or a museum, or what. All I got was stone.” He took another drink, looked slightly confused. “Lots of stone. Gravel, big slabs of it, probably a mountain, lots. Different kinds.”


“Could be.” Billy squinted, thinking. “Feels like both, maybe?” He shrugged. “So, that’s all I got. Sorry it’s not much.”
“Damn good brain, kid.” Tony told him. “If you get tired of magic, go into science. You think like a scientist. Logical, and covering all ground. I don’t understand the magic, but the thought you put into the search and what to look for was damn good.” Billy beamed.

“You’ve saved us a great deal of trouble.” Phil assured Billy. “We were starting a search of the entire planet. This narrows things down a lot.”

“It also keeps us from trying to find it through gamma radiation.” Bruce said, musing. “We can still give it a shot, but if it’s under a buncha rock, we’re not gonna get anything.”

“Maybe you can find the crystal that way.” Billy said. “It’s completely invisible to me. I don’t think the other magic user is hiding it, either. I’m pretty sure I’d sense that.”

“That is a known quality of such gems.” Thor told him. “Heimdall himself, who sees all, cannot locate them.”

“Well, I feel less like I failed, then.” Billy allowed.

“That wasn’t a failure, you saved us a shitload of work. Thanks.” Tony said with his usual bluntness.

“One last question.” Thor said.

“Sure.”

“Could you tell if the scepter was still complete? Was the gem with the metal portion? Or are they separated?”

Everyone sort of collectively winced, including Billy. “I hadn’t even thought of that.” He allowed, and thought a bit more. “I couldn’t tell. Can’t. That gem really is invisible to me.”

Thor nodded. “Thank you for sharing your gift and time with us.”

Billy nodded back. “You’re welcome. It was an interesting exercise.”

Tony held out his hand, and Billy shook it with a grin. “If you want to take off now with Logan, you can, but if you want to hang around that’s cool too. Want a tour? Lunch? Talk magic with Thor? Argue about it with Bruce?”

Billy’s eyes lit. “All of them? Can I meet Captain America? And Mjolnir?”

“Sure can.” Tony agreed.

“Certainly!” Thor chimed in. “Mew-Mew loves children!”
Public relations.

Later, after dinner, the Avengers gathered in the private conference room and Tony had never been more happy to have these people to lean on because he was at a loss. “Latveria, Sokovia, and Transia. With a slice of Serbia and some Romania for vampires.” He looked at the map JARVIS was projecting on the wall, taken from Billy’s casual finger-circle drawn over the map in the lab. “Might as well be the far side of the goddamn moon.”

“Far side of the moon is probably easier to get to, with your tech.” Phil put in unhelpfully. Though it was likely true.

“Pretty much confirms SHIELD doesn’t have it.” Natasha said thoughtfully.

“Can I go shoot Fury for losing it?” Clint asked.

“No.” said about five voices.

Steve – Cap - leaned back in his chair and sighed. “I was through there in the war. I don’t know about the current politics, but the topography alone is going to make things damned difficult.”

“At least it’s not winter.” Clint pointed out.

“Yet.” Natasha answered. “You think we’re going to find it in the next two months? It starts snowing in those mountains early.”

Everyone looked around the table unhappily.

“Ideas?” Phil finally asked.

“I’ve got five or six, at least, for getting into the countries legally, but until we have some idea where the damn thing is, they won’t do us any good.” Tony sighed. Pepper would not be amused if he asked her to build a manufacturing plant in downtown East Transia, but she might do it. She’d draw the line at Doomstadt though. He wouldn’t argue with her. Not that Victor VonDoom would voluntarily let Stark Industries within fifty miles of his borders.

“If we found documented, verified Hydra bases in their countries, what are the odds they’d let us in to clear them out?” Cap asked.

Phil hummed. “Sokovia and Transia, maybe. Romania’s an EU country and Serbia is trying to be, so we’d have to talk to the whole Union, with them. Victor VonDoom would tell us to fuck straight off and throw in with Hydra. If he hasn’t already.”

“Only Reed Richards could create a super-villain by being himself.” Stole Doom’s goddamn girlfriend, crashed his space station, knocked his corporation into free fall, and from the rumors, caused some mysterious but nasty illness in the same crash. Fucking Richards.

“Not now, Tony.” Cap told him.

“Reed really is an asshole, though.” Bruce pointed out, ha, go Brucie. “And VonDoom really does hate Americans thanks to him.”

“So we’re back to digging through old paperwork and trying gamma ray sensors and whatever else we can think of.” Cap summarized.
“Yeah, but over a smaller area.” Clint pointed out.

“I’ve got to say, I’m surprised at how easily you accepted young William’s magic.” Thor told Tony.

Tony shrugged. That was the start of a really uncomfortable topic. “How old is he, eight? Nine?”

“Nine.” Clint confirmed.

Tony felt himself nodding like a bobblehead and stopped. “I got my first patent at eight. For a handgun. I’ll be the last to say a kid that age doesn’t have power. At least Billy has some solid ethics and empathy to go along with.” He thought again about Billy, on his knees at the main table in the lab, tongue stuck in his teeth as he drew a circle with chalk. “Maybe it’s because it was a kid, but the magic seemed more understandable to me than most uses of it have been.” Because he did something semi-logical, instead of waving his hands around and poof.

“Such a simple spell is only possible because he is very powerful.” Thor explained. “He was a kind young man.”

“Billy’s pretty great.” Clint agreed.

They all looked at each other a while. “Ideas?” Phil finally asked.

“We need to go out and poke around.” Natasha said, chin on fist, staring at the screen. “I can do my old backpacking idiot co-ed thing, wander around, get the feel.” she glanced at Phil. “You and Clint should, too. Coordinate a little, put an ear to the ground. Phil, you should do your American professor writing a book about a vague topic. Maybe vampires, it’s predictable and gives you a reason to poke around old ruins.”

“I’ll be your backpacking buddy?” Clint asked.

“Nah, I think you’d do better as the professor’s grad student boy toy. I’ll get further alone. If we need to work together you can sneak off and have a dalliance with me behind your sugar daddy’s back.”

“How soon?” Phil asked.

“As possible. Dye party at my place tonight. Like old times.” Natasha said to Clint.

“Damn it, I hate when you dye my hair, you get it on my ears.”

“Wuss.”

“Do I need to offer resources, or is that just silly?” Tony asked. The three of them in action like this was something else. It was a smoothly running machine and he wondered how many dozens of jobs they’d done like this over the years. Thank Tesla they were on the same side.

Phil seemed to consider. “Pepper’s help ordering in a wardrobe for me would be appreciated. And a fast set of glasses from whoever you recommend. In someone else’s name. A completely made up name would be ideal.”

“I’ll need clothes, too.” Clint added.

Natasha thought for a moment. “I’ll talk to Darcy, see if I’m still in touch with grad student fashion. If not, I’ll let you know.” She turned to Clint. “Let Darcy dress you. She’ll know better than either of us what an American history grad student would wear.”

“That hardly counts, Pepper loves shopping, and Darcy will have a ball. But they’ll talk to you guys.
about it, maybe during your hair party. Stuff delivered tomorrow. Can you wait until at least late tomorrow to leave? We need to do a security briefing, and I’ve got to finish a couple things, first.” Tony asked.

“Sure. We won’t all leave at once, anyway.” Phil said easily.

“We’ll need the whole gang, not only us. And while we’re discussing the whole gang, question: Who exactly is Kate Bishop, to us?”

Clint pokered up. “A damn good friend, and—”

“Chill, Merida. That’s not how I meant it. I mean, is she a junior Avenger? Part of the staff? She’s working as one of Pepper’s aides right now; whatever she is, it’s already one of us. Do we want her to have a communicator and stuff?”

Nat smiled faintly, which made the hair on Tony’s neck stand up. “Kate Bishop has spent the last five-odd years being trained by me, Clint, and Phil, in everything we know.”

Tony would dearly love to know how Kate had earned that education. “So, Avengers auxiliary, then? Something like? We gonna have junior Avengers for emergencies?”

“We should, when possible.” Steve decided. “So Kate at the meeting?”

No one argued, so Tony figured that was settled. “Also, Pierce’s memorial service is the day after tomorrow,” he reminded all of them.

“Damn.” Natasha muttered. “I need to be there. You guys should leave ASAP,” she said to Phil and Clint. “We weren’t going to all turn up in the same area at the same time anyway. I’ll do my appearance and then get over there.”

“Who else is going?” Phil asked.

“I have to go.” Tony said. “Don’t want to, but Pepper wants a presence. I’m supposed to go and look disdainful. She’s refusing to go, I’m the lesser emissary.” He was looking forward to it. The ‘lesser emissary’ gigs always turned out to be interesting, at the least.

“Go together?” Natasha asked.

“Sure, that’ll confuse the shit out of people.” Tony said cheerfully.

“I’m not going. I won’t be able to keep my mouth shut.” Steve – CAP – decided. Tony couldn’t believe the dude had even that much discretion.

Tony looked around. No one else seemed to be going or interested in going. “Man, if only we could run the Winter Soldier through there… that’d be some entertainment.” he let himself say.

Clint outright cackled. Everyone else at least grinned.

“I’m half-tempted to go and hulk out in the middle of it.” Bruce said, which was good. Excellent. He was finally joking about it.

“That too would be entertaining.” Thor agreed.

“Speaking of Barnes” Bruce said slowly. “What’s he know about Hydra in Eastern Europe?”

Everyone looked at Steve, who looked nonplussed. “I don’t know. I’ll ask him tonight.” Bruce
always had the best ideas. “Let us know tomorrow, then, at the shared meeting unless it’s major. Related,” Tony added, “Darcy sorted paper for about an hour today, before deciding it would be better to digitize the whole damn thing.”

“There’s a reason most of that is hard copy only.” Phil said mildly.

“Well, we’re putting it on the Avengers servers, not Geocities.” Tony pointed out. Phil shrugged, so he continued. “I’ve made a couple rigs, that’ll be starting tomorrow morning. Anyone who has some spare time, head to the main conference room and flip pages. It requires literally no skill other than some manual dexterity. Darcy’s in charge, ask her for details.”

Everyone nodded. Thor looked intrigued, so Darcy probably had him at least for help.

“Thoughts, comments, arguments?” Phil asked. No one replied, so he stood. “That’ll do it, then.”

They all wandered out, singly or in groups. When Tony left, Steve was sitting back, staring at the map, asking JARVIS questions about recent history.

-A-

Sam was thinking about maybe instituting real office hours, given the amount of time he spent going down there to meet people anyway. As it was, he walked in and found Darcy standing in the middle of the pub, looking around bemusedly. “Let me guess.” She started. “This is Tony Stark’s idea of a shrink’s office.”

“Pretty much.” Sam agreed. “There’s an office through there if you feel better with a more traditional sort of thing.”

“Nah, I’m good.” She dropped into a chair at the table everyone was using. “Well. I desperately need help, and am worried for my sanity and my future… everything, but I’m okay with the décor.”

She didn’t seem to be in major crisis, and had a history of sarcasm, so Sam tried “Want a drink?”

She chuckled. “Sure, whatcha got?”

“Pepper’s favorite imported hot chocolate.”

“Hit me.”

“So what’s up?” Sam asked when they were both hunched over mugs.

“Two things, really.” Darcy said. “The one came up yesterday, I’d been meaning to talk to you already, but Jesus, I think I need to get my hormones checked or maybe I’m dying after yesterday.”

“What happened?”

“I dragged Steve to the Met. I’d never been, and thought he could stand to get out, and since he has an art background he’d probably be fun, or interesting. At the least, he’s a stand-up guy who wasn’t gonna ditch me to pick up some chick by the restrooms, you know?”

“Good assessment.” Sam said, amused. “How’d it go?”

“We had fun. He IS really interesting; we got into this huge fight in the Egyptian room about repatriating artwork to where it belongs, we kept shifting sides just to argue, they almost called security on us. It was hilarious.”
“Sounds terrible.” Sam said, face straight. Inwardly, he was delighted to hear Steve was actually relating to a woman his age.

“Oh GOD.” Darcy burst out, and covered her face with her hands. “In the middle of it, I realized. It’s like he’s my BROTHER. Zero spark. None!” She squinted through her fingers at him with one eye. “He’s smart. REALLY smart. He’s nice, he has manners, he’s FUNNY, he RESCUES KITTENS FOR FUCK’S SAKE, and oh my god that body, and we get home and he asks, was that a date, and I said no, it was a friendly thing. He seemed okay with that, sorta pleased, making friends, you know. He probably has women throwing themselves at him all the time on the basis of his looks, so I get it. Even so, I could be working on dating STEVE ROGERS, but…” she waved her hands vaguely. “I need to see a doctor.”

“The heart is a mysterious thing.” Sam finally offered, doing his best not to laugh. So far Steve’s only good female friend was Natasha, and while Natasha was great, she wasn’t going to do a damn thing toward getting Steve normalized for the twenty-first century. Of all the fantastic things Natasha was, ‘normalizing influence’ was not in the same state as the list. Darcy, on the other hand, was perfect for the job.

“The heart is a useless muscle who is ruining my life.” Darcy muttered.

“I know I wasn’t there and all, but… maybe you’ve got a potential good friend?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Darcy grumbled. “I’m taking him out later in the week to a jazz club. He spends WAY too much time alone. And he needs something to do besides destroying punching bags.”

“He really does.”

“So I’m going to be besties with Steve Rogers.” Darcy shook her head in wonder. “My life is seriously weird.”

“A lot of that going around.”

Y’ever think, though, how fuckin’ weird all this is? Waking up in Avengers goddamn Tower, or watching Pepper Potts put on her heels before going to make oil companies weep? The Norse god of thunder recently discovered Toaster Strudel and keeps stealing mine. He’s stealthier than he looks. Keeps sneaking through, I only know he’s been there when I find the wrappers in the trash.”

“I’m still adjusting.” Sam admitted. It was REALLY fucking weird. He’d run into Natasha at about three AM one night, ghosting through the common kitchen in men’s boxers and an Army Rangers tee shirt, and he really was not equipped to deal with that, his sister and momma aside. He’d dropped into a crouch, ready to fight, but thankfully she’d known he was there and said calmly “relax, Wilson, you’ll sprain something.”

“Thor, when he came back this last time, he’s here to stay for a while. As his dad’s emissary. He’s got diplomatic status, is supposed to lay the groundwork for an embassy and some trade, all that stuff. He’s telling me this, and of course it’s totally my thing, so I’m fascinated, and then he gives me that smile. You know the pure sweetness smile?”

“I’ve seen it.”

“It’s as bad as Steve’s puppy eyes, I swear. He gives me the smile, and explains that in Asgard, people like him, who are visiting strange lands will often appoint someone they call ‘Vinur’ which I am likely butchering the pronunciation of. The Vinur is a native to wherever they’re visiting, and functions like a guide. Not so much as an official, or on an economic or diplomatic scale, just
someone they trust to, you know, tell them they tied their tie wrong or what spoon to use.”

“And he wants you?”

Darcy, instead of answering, reached into an inside pocket in her hoodie, and laid on the table an amazing circle of gold and silver metals (who knew what kind, at least they wouldn’t know until Tony got near it) and jewels of all sorts and sizes. “There’s a badge of office.”

“Wow.” Sam said, at a loss for words.

“RIGHT?” Darcy agreed.

“Give me a minute.”

“It’s taken me a week so far, take your time.”

Sam nodded a little, turning things over in his head. What he knew of Thor, and Darcy, personalities, educations, possibilities. “You’d be part of the embassy?”

“No. A member of his household. That’s a big distinction, both here in Midgard and in Asgard. But I would be providing all sorts of information to him, most of it then having an impact on said diplomacy. Interplanetary diplomacy. Guided by ME. I’m not qualified for that!”

Knowing Darcy, Sam had to ask, “wouldn’t you provide the information to him anyway? Haven’t you BEEN doing that?”

That hauled her up short. “Uh. Maybe. Probably?”

“I’ve seen you giving him history lessons, him and Steve and James, and anyone else you can rope in, including me. You’re good at it and I can tell you enjoy it. And your ‘big picture’ lessons where you take what they know and apply it to a larger theme.”

“Well, yeah...”

“I absolutely can’t answer this question for you, but aren’t you really doing the job already?”

Darcy stared at him.

“Just saying. Thor calls you his sister, and he doesn’t seem like a dude who does that lightly. I doubt his culture does either.”

Darcy stared some more. Finally, she asked “What if I wind up in some kind of conflict, between Asgard and Midgard? I can’t lie.”

“Isn’t that Thor’s point? Don’t get me wrong, but wouldn’t you either give him hell or explain what was wrong, depending? I’ve known you a week and that’s what I’d expect you to do, so I can’t imagine why Thor would expect any different from you. Maybe that’s exactly what he wants.”

“I can’t believe you’re convincing me to take this job.” Darcy said in wonder.

“I think you’re already doing it, and you’re great at it. Maybe Thor thinks the same, and wants to make it official, there’s probably all kinds of prestige and respect for you in it.” He wondered if there was a paycheck. If so, he was sure that was gonna be something else, too.

“Not the response I was expecting.”
“Yeah, I get that a lot.”

She laughed. “I’ll talk to Thor about it. But you’re making me think probably, now.”

Sam paused, wondering if what he was going to say next was wise. “You know what else. Uh. Big picture.”

“What?”

“You could do a PhD dissertation on the political structure of Asgard that would kick everyone’s asses. No one knows anything about them. You actually do know more than anyone else except maybe Jane, and Jane’s a physicist. You’re the only one qualified to understand their political structure who has been close enough to get any idea. The Asgardians might even consider it a favor, getting the information out so it’d be easier for them to work with us.”

Darcy’s jaw dropped.

“If you ask Tony, he could probably get you into somewhere for the fall semester. He’s got me at NYU for my stuff. Dude loves to meddle, he’d probably even enjoy it. I know we’d all love watching you stick it to the old white men who run those kinds of departments.”

“You are a very bad influence, Sam Wilson.”

“I hear that a lot, too. Don’t tell my momma.”

“I won’t.” She looked down at the necklace again, stroked her finger over it, looked back up at him, eyes sparkling. “I think I need to go talk to some people about some stuff.” She smiled brightly, and stood.

Sam saw her out. “Try and schedule your classes with mine, we’ll get Happy to drive us, it’ll be great.”

He watched her leave, laughing and shaking her head. She was gonna turn the world on its ear and he was gonna enjoy the hell out of watching it happen.

-A-

The next day was pretty quiet, thank goodness. He went through what was becoming his routine: run, breakfast with everyone, hang out with Bucky, help out around the place as needed. He spent a couple hours flipping pages in a V-shaped contraption while lights flashed and JARVIS beeped at him, digitizing all the stolen files. Phil, Clint, and Natasha had disappeared overnight and returned with more boxes and laughing smiles on their faces. He hadn’t realized how lost Natasha was while they worked together, until now, seeing her mesh into the team with Phil and Clint, the three in harmony.

His goal was to get the Avengers working like that, but they had a ways to go, yet. A long ways. All of them living in the Tower, though, interacting all day and night, that was good. He wanted to thank Tony again, but that always got squirming and squinting, so he settled for wandering through his shop every day around lunch time and casually leaving food sitting around while asking stupid questions about technology. Sometimes Tony made him sit there in the shop, on the beat up couch, and watch a movie that was ‘important cultural heritage’. Dum-E would make him popcorn in the microwave.

Yesterday Bruce caught his eye and gave him a thumbs up as he was leaving.
Since everyone was needed at the security briefing anyway, they called down to the poor executive chef and had her provide dinner. With a day’s notice she’d come up with prime rib for sixty (they ate like sixty) with all the trimmings. Steve hoped Tony and Pepper were paying her enough. Probably. He’d been poking around the internet and found that Stark Industries was a world leader in pay and benefits for their people, all the way down to the janitors. The policies had been instituted gradually, pushed through when Tony took over the company at Howard’s death. When Pepper came on as his PA, things picked up speed. That made him inordinately happy.

Rhodey had turned up, and said vaguely he wanted to talk to some folks after dinner, which was worrying, but one problem at a time. Now they had Tony’s ‘security briefing’ to get through, and he was kind of curious about Tony Stark’s idea of security, and how to achieve it.

“Okay.” Tony stood as soon as the food was dished up. “First-

“Sit down and eat before you start this.” Steve said without thinking. Whoops. He was trying to be more polite and diffident to Tony, but damn. He didn’t eat enough. He absolutely did NOT beam back at the huge smile Pepper flashed him. No.

Tony sat and started eating. Pepper caught his eye and shook her head at him. Apparently they were choosing their battles again, and getting him to eat was enough. Steve shut up and ate. The food, as always, was amazing. He’d go down and compliment the chef again tomorrow.

To stall some, Steve decided to share what little information he’d gotten out of Bucky. Even though it really wasn’t a topic for dinner. Hell, most of what people talked about now wasn’t a topic for polite society ever, so, hell. “I spoke to Bucky last night about Hydra in Eastern Europe.”

Everyone suddenly got intense, especially the crew shipping out in the morning.

“He…” It had been bad. Really, really bad. “He said to concentrate on Sokovia and Latveria, if you could get into Latveria. Nat, he mentioned you were known to the Latverian government, he didn’t say how. Then, he… he got sick.”

Sam took over, thank goodness. “He had an episode.” Sam provided for everyone. “Bad one. Not violent in any way, but very not good.”

“He was still in bed and said he didn’t want to eat, when we came upstairs.” Hill provided.

“I’ll take down something easy on the stomach, a little later.” Steve told them.

Sam nodded. “I’ll go too. I doubt he’ll want to talk about it, and I KNOW I don’t wanna hear it, but if he wants to, I need to give him the opportunity.” Before Steve could say anything, Sam pointed at him. “Do not START, man, you are the absolute last person he wants to tell about stuff he did. Shit, I don’t wanna tell you about my candy heist in third grade, and I’ve known you a month.”

Fine, then. Steve shut up and ate, not able to think of anything else to add.

Tony bounced back up, having wolfed down at least enough food to keep a sparrow alive. “Right, Avengers and staff. Rhodey, you don’t get the fun stuff ‘til you sign up with us full time.” He pulled a box from somewhere and began handing small rectangles of glass around the table. They were surprisingly heavy. “These are, well, we’re going to call them communicators, but what they are is the next-gen StarkPhone.”

Pepper cleared her throat. “They’re about six generations ahead of what we sell now. At the moment, they aren’t cost-effective for retail.”
Steve knew what that meant from his days helping Pepper learn to control Extremis: not cost effective for retail meant really damned expensive and probably hand made. He put his down very carefully.

Tony must have seen him. “Ah ah.” he pointed at Steve. “These are made of- well, all kinds of crazyass components. They’re MUCH stronger than they look and not actually made of glass. Put your finger on the screen anywhere, JARVIS will initialize it for your prints alone, and no one else can use it.”

Leo cautiously raised his hand.

“Kid, you’ve gotta quit with that and shout things out. You’re a leading mind in technology, for fuck’s sake.” Tony said, exasperated. “What?”

“We’re… Avengers?”

“Avengers auxiliary, support staff, whatever, yeah. What’d you think you were doing around here?”

He exchanged a look with Jemma. “Ah. Making Stark Industries a lot of money?”

“That too.” Tony agreed easily. “Also yourselves. Patents have your names on them, then we license them back from you, didn’t you read your contract?”

“Not… really.” Leo admitted.

“I have so much work to do on you.” Tony sighed.

The science support staff looked shell-shocked except for Bruce and Betty. He’d ask Bruce what the big deal was later. Apparently the patent thing wasn’t normal? Down the table, though, Kate Bishop had begun smiling at the conversation and looked happier than he’d ever seen her, beaming down at her phone, so that was probably a good choice.

People were poking at their phones, and they were lighting up, so Steve cautiously laid a fingertip on his. There was a spark that expanded to his shield. Then it shrank to a pinpoint, and shifted to what looked like a regular smart phone screen. There was a contacts icon, and then an unlabeled red square.

“If you ask, JARVIS will move all your stuff from your current phone to this one. Or synch them to run in tandem. The red square – ha, Natasha, like old times – is direct communication to JARVIS. He can immediately route calls or texts to whoever you need, if time is of the essence. This little proggie – shut up, Clint” he said as Barton coughed ‘old man’ at him “can be downloaded to any other phones you guys have, and hidden behind any icon you want. Talk to JARVIS about it. The phones are also set up to send a mayday message, with location, to all the other phones, if they’re damaged.” He pointed at Thor. “Keep that in mind, Sparky. I grounded these as many was as I could figure how, but nothing is going to stand up to a direct lightning strike or you in a bad mood.”

“I understand.” Thor said with a smile.

“Next.” Tony rolled on. “The Avengers game. JARVIS?” the screen in the kitchen flicked on to the home screen of some kind of video game.

“I didn’t know this was one of Stark Industries’ projects.” Phil said mildly.

“Shell of a shell of a corporation of a friend of my mother’s sort of thing.” Tony said easily.
Phil laughed.

“Right. Get to this game on ANY phone, tablet, or computer it is downloaded onto, and click on the secret agent five times. For touch pads, you have to put your finger on there for ten seconds.” As Tony spoke, the screen flickered with haze once or twice and went black. “You’ll get this. Say or type “HELPJARVIS” and it will bounce you through to him.”

“Any phone or computer. In the world.” Clint said into the stunned silence.

“Well, it has to have the game downloaded, I can’t work miracles.” Tony said.

Steve was considering how much planning this had taken; the game had been out for months before they’d all washed up on Tony’s doorstep.

“That can’t possibly be legal.” Phil said.

Whoops, and there was that.

“They have to catch me first. Plus we slipped a little something into the EULA, no one ever reads those.” Tony replied with a shark-smile. “With me so far?” he asked the room. “If JARVIS goes off line, which we have redundancies like you would not believe in place to avoid, but IF that happens, you immediately switch to a party line with me, Steve, Bruce, Thor, Sam, Natasha, Clint, and Phil. We will figure out what the fuck and kick righteous ass as needed.”

“I’m an Avenger?” Sam blurted in surprise.

“What, you think I built those wings for air shows? Anyone think Sam isn’t an Avenger? I thought Insight was his debut. Proved anything I needed to know.” Tony looked around the room.

No one spoke.

“Right.” Tony took a deep breath. “In most cases, JARVIS can’t be knocked out, but he can be disconnected from things; the building, the suit. He can also disconnect himself in crisis situations. Last line of defense sort of stuff, here, if power is cut to the entire building and our phones are blacked out somehow.” He strode over to one of the black mirrored panels that were ubiquitous throughout the Tower. They were about six feet off the floor, and contained, Steve had been told, security monitoring, climate control, and fire safety. “I’m trusting you guys with JARVIS, here. Do not let me down.” He reached up and put a thumb on the upper left corner of the panel. “Finger here, push upward.” the smooth surface popped off, exposing a network of lenses and other equipment Steve had no hope of identifying. “These are JARVIS’ sensors. He doesn’t live in the ceiling.” Tony said to Steve with a grimace, like he was trying to smile. “He lives in the walls.” He looked at the rest of the room, staring in shock. “JARVIS has ways to protect himself. Lots of them. But it goes without saying, if you hurt my baby, I will end you.”

Everyone nodded again. Rhodey, Steve noticed, was watching Tony with something like shock on his face. Pepper was watching everyone else, probably making sure they could be trusted.

“This group of sensors, here.” he put a finger next to a large central circle of doodads. “There’s a tab on the left side, and.” he flipped it open, like a door, and underneath was… it looked like a speaker.

It looked like a speaker from when he was in the war.

“You evil, paranoid genius.” Clint said with pure admiration in his voice. “How long have those been there?”
“Since I built the building.” For everyone else he continued, “This is what’s known formally as a sound-powered phone system.” Steve heard sounds of comprehension around the table, and was surprised to realize he understood it too.

“A bitch box?” He asked in surprise.

Steve winced at his own language and was about to apologize for it when Natasha kicked him and said “Oh, just don’t.”

“Yes. This is World War Two era technology, commonly known at the time as a bitch box.” Tony said with a grin. “In easy to understand language, if you shout into this, a signal goes to all the other speakers that are on the circuit. Opening the little door connects it to the circuit. IF the panel and the cover are open, someone at the other end can hear it. No power required.”

“It’s a way to communicate anywhere in the building, if power is cut.” Phil summarized for the kids still looking confused.

“Yep.” Tony confirmed. “The fewer phones on the circuit, the better they work, so make sure to close up after yourself if you’re using them. That’s about it for security toys today.” He looked at the Delta gang. “Make sure you get that comm app onto whatever phone you’re taking with you. I assume this thing,” he held up his own communicator “will be too conspicuous for some college geeks.”

All three nodded.

Steve wasn’t the only tactical genius in the room. “Sit down and finish eating.” He told Tony gently, surprised when Tony actually did.

-A-

They’d cleared out after dinner, most of them probably off to play with their new phones. Pepper, Tony, Phil, and Steve himself were hanging around, waiting for whatever Rhodey had to say.

He’d also asked for whoever was running PR, and Darcy had hesitantly said “Uh, I’ve been monitoring public opinion, a bit.”

“What don’t you do around here?” Tony asked.

Darcy pretended to think. “Date you, break the laws of physics, and windows.”

They all laughed. She was great at putting people at ease, at least a thousand times better than he was. Maybe she’d give him lessons.

“What’s up, buttercup?” Tony asked Rhodey bluntly.

“The Iron Legion. Seriously, Tones?”

Tony looked guilty, so they all paid closer attention. “It’s a good idea.” Tony said.

Rhodey rolled his eyes. “Only to you. Well. From a PURELY strategic view, it’s a good idea. I will give you that. But otherwise, no.”

“Details?” Darcy asked, looking around to see if anyone else knew what was going on.

“Most of you remember, JARVIS and I have a deal that he tags me if Tony decides to put repulsors in anything.” Rhodey reminded them.
Uh oh.

“It’s a good idea.” Tony repeated. “Remember how useful all those suits were last Christmas.”

During the Mandarin thing.

“Explain?” Steve asked carefully.

Pepper spoke calmly. “After the Invasion, Tony went back to Malibu. He spent a lot of time building alternative Iron Man suits. Lots of them. How many?”

“Uh, like forty?” Tony said, deliberately vague.

Steve wondered how much that had cost.

“When things went really wrong, JARVIS fired them up and sent them in as a mini army.” Rhodey continued. “They were damned effective, but you can’t do that as a regular thing.”

“Why not?” Tony said, seriously. “It worked.”

Before anyone else could say anything, Darcy spoke. “Image.”

They all looked at her in surprise. Well, no surprise from Steve, or apparently Pepper either.

“Right now, the Avengers are on the razor’s edge.” Darcy told them all. “You make a lot of people really nervous. Not governments, they’re always nervous. Regular people. You had the power to stop an alien invasion. Steve by himself – as the world sees it – brought down Project Insight. Tony, again by himself as the world is seeing it, took down the Mandarin. The Air Force One thing was INSANE. Everyone else is a completely unknown quantity. No one knows what they’ve been doing since the Invasion. Well, sorry, except for when Natasha showed up in a Senate hearing and told the US Government to fuck off, then walked out with a mysterious, ass-kicking Mona Lisa smile. The overwhelming attitude on line – and remember, the internet is more intelligent and liberal than the world at large – is kind of holding their breath. You’re getting credit for saving the planet a couple times, but they’re all waiting to see if you turn around and try to take it over. Because to be honest? From where I’m sitting? You actually could if you wanted to. The fact that you haven’t yet earns you SOME trust and respect, but again, everyone’s kind of holding their breath waiting to see what happens. You’ve got to look on the level and honest and all that. Right now it’s the only thing keeping public opinion in your favor.”

Rhodey waved his hand at Darcy in agreement. “There you go. And the further you get from the US in miles or philosophy, the less tolerant and the more worried that attitude is. Governments and general populace.”

“But.”

“Are you gonna make JARVIS’ existence public?” Rhodey asked.

“No.” Tony said immediately.

“So a robot army controlled by something no one knows about.” Rhodey said.

Tony wilted a little. “Just for backup-”

“We can’t, Tony.” Pepper said softly. “I wish you’d talked to me and saved Rhodey the trip, but he and Darcy are right. People would panic and we’re on the edge already.”
“You’ll regret not having them sooner or later.” Tony said tiredly. He’d conceded the point, was rubbing his temples hard.

“I already regret not having them.” Steve said honestly. He might not have said it otherwise, but Tony looked so defeated. “But they’re right. In the long run, we can’t.”

Tony looked at Phil. “This is more of that ends and means bullshit, isn’t it?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what it is.” Phil said. “It makes things a lot harder for us, but why save the world from one thing, and then leave the world needing saved from us? That’s why we have each other, to keep us in line.”

Tony sighed again, seemed like he was debating saying something, and finally said “I’m a futurist. People never realize what that REALLY means. I see things how things can be.” He raised haunted eyes to all of them. “It isn’t always the happy smart phone shit. There’s more than one reason I used to make weapons and it wasn’t all about dear old Dad.”

They all nodded, and Steve wanted to hug him, but respected the space Tony had put between them. “We know. But we have your back now.”

Tony took a deep breath, and nodded. “I hope it’s enough.”

So did Steve.

-A-

It was all taking too goddamn long, Natasha thought. Waiting on the stupid memorial, getting to Europe, finding information. They didn’t even know how long the scepter had been missing. Hydra could have had it for two years now, ever since the Invasion, and here she was at a dog and pony show for the biggest Hydra fuckhead of all. She put on a pretty face to go with the goddamn wig over her newly dyed hair, took a breath, and resolved not to kill anyone at this damned service. Including Tony. The crowd gave them a wide berth, which was convenient. They sailed into the cathedral, took seats about halfway in, and waited for the service to begin. Tony was squirming.

“What in the hell, Stark.” she snarled through her teeth. She was not in the mood for his shit right now.

“Waiting for the lightning strike.”

Ha. “Stare at the goddamn NASA window and be one with the fucking moon rock.”

After a long moment, he said “bump my knee when cameras pan over this way.”

Oh for fuck’s sake, what was he going to do now. Like she was one to talk. Fine. She waited, nudged.

He pulled a damned FLASK out of his inside pocket and took a swig. No. She was NOT dealing with Drunk Stark on top of the rest of this nonsense. She casually reached over, took the flask, and raised it to her own lips, intending to drink it all.

It was filled with water.

Huh.

She took a sip and passed it back. “Your booze sucks.” she said loudly enough for the people around them to hear and be scandalized. Like she gave a fuck. She was a godless commie, wasn’t she? Half
the senators sitting here had said so. She glared at one over her glasses until he looked away. It didn’t
take long, spineless bastard.

“Shut up, I only drink the best.”

Best tap water. “Please, I had better vodka than that with my lunch in grade school.”

Tony burst out laughing, and more heads turned.

Yeah, fuck Pierce.

That’s about when the service began, and she, raised to despise all religion, zoned out. Listening
would only make her angrier, and she’d promised Phil before he left that she wouldn’t cause a scene
during the service itself. So fine. She sat through it, an eye out for weapons. There were none, but
she spotted a couple other flasks and a boatload of not-so-covert texting. For a while she amused
herself by counting pagan symbols, and gave it up in the three hundreds somewhere. Finally the pipe
organ – best part of the place, if you asked her – started up to end the service and she stood before
anyone else, because fuck Pierce.

Outside, the media was inevitably there, and with the service over, not pretending to be polite any
longer. They started shouting questions, mostly at Tony but a few at her, as soon as they were
spotted. They WERE pretty visible. She hung on to Tony’s arm and swanned down the steps,
coming to a stop with him wherever he decided it was optimal to make a statement. Whatever, he
was better at that stuff than she was.

He did his best Tony Fucking Stark routine. Secretary of Defense, blah blah, representing Stark
Industries, blah blah. She’d give him credit, he brought up the ‘suspected Hydra ties’, which he was
calling probable, as often as humanly possible. Which she figured was the whole reason he’d agreed
to come. She waited for her own moment, the entire reason SHE showed up, patiently. She’d get her
opening.

Finally someone stuck a camera in her face and said “And you, Ms Romanov? What are you doing
here today?”

She gave them all her best Black Widow smile and said, “I wanted to make sure he’s dead.”

The media went insane. Mission accomplished.

-A-

Steve finally caved in and went to the common room – biggest viewing screen – to watch Pierce’s
memorial service; Darcy had it on. She couldn’t resist any sort of major news that might go into a
history book. He knew he’d probably cuss a blue streak the entire time, but he wanted to see what
Tony and Natasha were up to. He’d seen the gleam in their eyes when they’d left that morning,
garment bags in hand, and neither one of them had a history of sitting idly by in these situations. Or,
you know, manners. Ever. Since Natasha’s senate hearing, she’d decided her face was out to the
public and quit operating covertly so much, which was terrifying to see, as well.

“You really shouldn’t be doing this, man.” Sam said easily, sitting beside him. “Even your blood
pressure is bound to take a hit.”

“Seriously. I’m a news junkie, you’ve got no excuse.” Darcy agreed. “You should go punch a… Oh
my god.”

Steve turned. There on the screen was a closeup zoom of Tony and Natasha, side by side in the
National Cathedral. Tony was wearing a light blue summer suit with a white shirt and an Iron Man tie that LIT UP. Natasha… Natasha seemed to be wearing a very, very short, definitely very low cut dress barely appropriate for that night club they’d gone to. He was not sure how her breasts were staying inside it. It was very, very red. So was her lipstick. Both were wearing sunglasses. Indoors. Given no one else was, he assumed that was still very, very rude. As he watched, they passed a flask back and forth, dear God, Natasha said something, and Tony threw his head back and LAUGHED OUT LOUD DURING A SERVICE AT THE NATIONAL CATHEDRAL.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.” he said weakly, dropping into a chair and holding his head.

“I love that woman.” Sam said admiringly. “I mean, she’s way too much woman for me, you know what I’m saying?”

Darcy nodded. “I absolutely do.”

“But oh my god, I love that woman. I wanna have her babies.” Sam sighed.

“I’m gonna order her some flowers.” Darcy agreed. “And chocolates. She needs chocolates. Maybe lingerie.”

Later, after Natasha’s sound bite about making sure Pierce was dead went viral, Sam and Darcy also baked her some cookies and got her a bottle of vodka.

-A-

After sad looks from Steve, a “Really?” text from Clint’s mission phone to her mission phone, a grin and head shake from Bruce, and cackling from Tony, Natasha finally got home. Her public phone had exploded with news media requests for interview, so it was off indefinitely. Not like she was sociable anyway.

She was concerned that she had done something Tony Stark approved of. That was not a good sign of anything except the End of Days.

The elevator door opened and she slowed, walking out of it, to take in the sight of… offerings? gifts? piled on a new table next to the door to her apartment. On the door was a post-it: “N- didn’t want to crash your apartment and freak you out. Nice job today. D.” She put the note in the pocket of her suit, and inspected the haul. A dozen roses, a box – a big box – of Ainger chocolates, hooray, a bottle of Viche Pitia vodka, a bag of homemade chocolate-chip cookies with “from Sam and Darcy” written on it, and a tee shirt with another post-it. This note said “I was gonna get you lingerie, but that would be creepy. D.” Natasha held it up. It was pink and said “BADASS” in rhinestones. There was also a small pile of her favorite MAC cosmetics and a post-it from Kate, “you go, girl” in her scratchy handwriting.

She stood there, staring blankly at the gifts for some time. Never in her life had… well, had she had this. Clint and Phil were lovely, and Clint gave high fives and Phil would give half smiles and shake his head, and on bad nights all three would cuddle, but she’d never had a girlfriend before. She’d been… cordial with Kate, but Kate had always been more Clint’s friend and she’d stayed away. Until now.

Smiling, she gathered up her take and let herself into her apartment. She’d eat the chocolates tonight while packing; the cookies she could take with her to Europe and explain away as a package from her mother or something. Unfortunately none of the rest would fit her persona; she’d thank Darcy for the flowers before she left and put them in the common room for everyone to enjoy.
Maybe Darcy and Kate would like to have a spa day when she got back. That was a girlfriend thing, right? Sam could come along if he wanted.
Threats.

Chapter Summary

“What are the odds this is Hydra, distracting us? They have to know we’re still looking for them, even if they don’t know we’re looking for the scepter.”

He was at breakfast the next morning – how in hell was he on a regular sleeping and eating schedule? - hunched over a plate of eggs and toast when some blond woman walked in. Tony ended up back against the wall with his repulsor covered hand pointed at her. “How IN HELL did you get in here?” He demanded. That should not be possible. Security for the upper floors of the Tower was insane.

Sam stood slowly, pulling the utility knife in his pocket, eyes never leaving the stranger in their kitchen. Bruce was backing toward the fire stairs. Everyone else was frozen. Steve – Cap – glanced up, shook his head, and continued eating. WHAT IN HELL, STEVE. “One of these days you’re going to get shot, pulling this nonsense.” He told the blond woman easily between bites of toast.

“Oh good, that worked then.” The blond woman said with Natasha’s voice, and laugh, and suddenly the body posture changed and… it was Natasha.

“That is fucking eerie.” Tony told her.

“I almost broke her arm the first time she did it to me.” Steve said with a glare toward Natasha. “Slunk into my quarters at SHIELD and asked me in a German accent if I wanted to betray the Mother Country. Might have killed her, but she started laughing as soon as I grabbed her.”

She’d dyed her hair Marilyn Monroe blond, and let it curl around her head. Her eyes were lined with lots of black liner that changed the shape of them. She was wearing a baggy sweater, tight jeans, and heavy socks with boots and carrying a backpack. “Do I pass?”

“Jesus.” Sam muttered and sat down again.

“The outfit works,” Darcy said, and how was she the consultant here as well as the ten thousand other things she was doing? “But the makeup. What was the rule?”

Natasha blinked. “I swear, everything is out of the drug store, like you said. Well, I indulged some at Target, but I stayed in the budget.”

Darcy moved closer, inspected her face. “You have mad skills.”

“The eyeliner isn’t half bad.”

“Elf?”

“Yeah.”

Steve leaned over and Tony did NOT pet the cat on his shoulder. “Is that still English?”

“Pretty sure.” Tony told him, tongue in cheek.
“Right, I’m taking off, then.” Natasha told everyone.

“Be safe.” Darcy told her, and they hugged.

Tony didn’t know when that friendship had formed but he, for one, was terrified. From the look he took around the table, the others realized how this was going and wisely planned to stay the hell out of their way.

-A-

Over dinner that night, Tony asked, “Which of the men here don’t have a tuxedo? Something recent and tailored, not something you bought from a rental place in college.” He added with a glare toward Bruce, who openly laughed at him. As he’d expected, Sam, Leo, and Thor raised their hands.

“Right. In an attempt to look like responsible citizens of the world, that means being seen in public doing nice stuff. For our purposes, right now, that means the Maria Stark Foundation summer ball, held in July every year. I’ll make appointments for you, we’ll get you fitted. Go to the ball, make nice, don’t act like power-hungry savages ready to take over the world. Leo, that means you. I know your real goal is evil overlord.”

“Uh.” Leo said.

“I don’t suppose claiming I have nothing to wear will get me anywhere.” Maria Hill said without hope.

“No.” Pepper said sympathetically. “We’ll do a shopping trip or two, on the Avengers expense account, and make sure all the ladies are outfitted. Start thinking about what kind of dress you want, we’ll get things rolling.”

“While I am always happy to support such endeavors,” Thor said, “I am afraid I do not know how to comport myself at such an event.” He always got really formal when trying to be polite. You’d think, Tony reflected, that dropping a space alien down into the middle of a formal event would be a nightmare, but actually he and Pepper had the least worries about Thor; he would become still and quiet and compliment people, when at a loss in any kind of situation. That always worked. Thor had explained once that by Asgardian law of hospitality – which was a big deal – it was a horrifying disgrace to the guest, for a host to have to apologize for the behavior of their guest in any way. Thor considered himself Tony’s guest. Not as guest in Tony’s house; as guest on Tony’s PLANET. Thor considered his behavior a reflection on Tony, wherever he went, especially in public.

Tony had tried, more than once, to explain to Thor his own past. Compared to the sex tapes, the drinking, and calling the Senate Defense Committee assclowns, there wasn’t much Thor could do that would offend Tony. Thor nodded politely and remained on best behavior in public and with anyone who was not the Avengers and support staff.

“We can do some lessons.” Pepper told Thor with a smile. “Dancing, general manners, how to eat, what to drink.” She enjoyed taking him out, too. “Don’t worry too much. It’s the opposite of a state banquet, if that’s what you’re thinking of. People stand around in fancy clothes, chat, and drink, mostly. There’s some dancing, but you don’t have to if you don’t want to. It’s all finger food, not a seated meal, so you don’t have to worry about table manners.”

“Ah!” Thor said with a smile. “That sounds enjoyable.”

Bless him, he’d actually think it was.

“If Natasha and Clint get back in time, we can make them give dancing lessons to anyone who wants
“them.” Tony decided. He’d bribe them with something. “Looked like Coulson knew what he was doing on the dance floor, too.”

“I should probably have dance lessons.” Darcy decided. “All I can do is the millennial sway-and-chat. I’ll see what I can talk them into.”

“In between doing everything.” Tony couldn’t resist saying.

“Except the windows.” She agreed. “And I’m still not dating you.”

-A-

They’d had a business lunch out, she and Kate, and saw off their guests and stayed at the restaurant late to eat dessert, kick around strategy, and trade smart remarks about being women in the tech biz. Also to discuss shoes and possibly clothes shopping. So they didn’t leave until after the lunch crowd madness, and decided to walk the two blocks back to the Tower rather than have Happy drive them.

They were halfway between the restaurant and the Tower when Kate leaned in with a fake laugh and hissed “Put your back to the wall, tag JARVIS, and look helpless.” That was when Pepper noticed the four large men in badly fitting suits around them.

She did as she was told. This helpless female gig was for the birds.

Kate started off with what she’d told Pepper was her ‘ditzy girl’ routine, saying blankly to the one nearest them, “Is there some kind of problem? Did Stark Industries send you?” as if they were unknown bodyguards.

All four men – whose descriptions Pepper was relaying to JARVIS over her phone – moved a bit closer and the one Kate had spoken to said awkwardly, “Uh, yeah, we’re here to take you back to, uh, the office.”

A black van pulled up. Hell. Pepper relayed that to JARVIS, too. And, noticing some bystanders, told him to get ready to scrub a lot of images of Kate off the internet.

“That’s so nice.” Kate said, smiling brightly at the goon. Then with no warning she punched him in the throat. He dropped instantly, choking and wheezing. In a move Pepper had seen Natasha make, Kate lifted a foot and spun backward, planting a stiletto heel in another goon’s crotch, and he too dropped to the ground, this time wailing. The van took off into traffic, and Pepper called out the license plate to JARVIS.

Two goons left. One advanced on her, and Pepper decided boss who delegated was one thing, but damsel in distress, absolutely NOT, and used slightly-faster-than-normal speed to get past his guard and punch HIM in the throat, too. He went down clutching at his neck.

“You know, knives really piss me off.” Kate said, and when Pepper turned back, Kate and the last goon were circling on the pavement, Kate in a low crouch, without her shoes. The guy took a couple fairly clumsy swings, then Kate moved in, blocked with her left, and kneed as she tried to get the knife loose. “Oh, it is ON, motherfucker, that is my tattoo.” Pepper saw with horror that there was blood on the sleeve of Kate’s jacket, a second before Kate punched the man full in the face. He staggered back a little, and she hit him in the face twice more, as hard as she could from where Pepper was standing.

He went down, finally. Kate spit on him as Happy screeched up in the limo and Tony, Sam, and Thor came in for landings. Steve pounded up a moment later on foot, shield on his arm. Other than Tony in the suit, all of them were in street clothes with their equipment hastily grabbed and aw, they
looked worried.

“I think we’re fine.” Pepper said. “I’m fine for sure. Kate’s bleeding.”

All four men immediately turned to Kate, who was scowling down at her left forearm. “It’s not that deep. Just enough to ruin my suit and my tattoo, goddamned it.” She stepped back into her shoes, then went over and kicked the guy who’d had the knife.

Happy stepped forward with a first aid kit. “Let’s see the arm.”

Kate shrugged out of her jacket, saw the ripped out seams in both shoulders, and swore. Then she saw the torn seam in her skirt, and went back to kick the guy with the knife some more. “Do you have ANY idea how hard it is to find suits this color? IN LINEN?” She demanded, and kicked him again.

Steve sort of boggled, and Pepper tried not to giggle; he really had no idea what was going on with modern women.

The men started restraining goons as sirens closed in, coming toward them. Pepper and Sam walked over to Kate to see what the damage was. There was a shallow cut in the middle of her forearm, crossing the floral tattoo that covered most of the skin there.

“God DAMN it.” Kate snarled, seeing it.

Sam reached for a bandage in the case Happy held out. “Hang on, we’ll fix you up.”

“Is that a quickclot?” Kate demanded, seeing the sealed wrap on the bulky dressing Sam had grabbed. “No, don’t start it healing yet. Slap some gauze over it to keep it from bleeding on anything, I’ll see if Jemma can work some of her magic and maybe fix up the tat.”

Happy stared at Kate for a long moment. Sam shrugged, put the high-tech dressing back in the kit, and got out some gauze and a roller bandage instead.

“Superheroes.” Happy complained. “You’re all crazy.”

Kate blinked at him for a moment, then threw back her head and laughed out loud. Pepper heard what sounded like a thousand cell phones clicking. She hoped JARVIS saved the good photos after scrubbing them off the internet.

-A-

Pepper insisted on going back to work, because of course she did. Tony left her to it, with extra monitoring from JARVIS and Steve going along to pose as her substitute admin in a suit he’d pulled on in a hurry. Sidekick was probably pissed as hell to be left alone.

Tony spent a some time giving the NYPD hell, and then getting legal to promise him no holds would be barred in going after the four idiots. He had to do it all over the phone, because Pepper forbid he go down and give people hell in person; apparently it was bad for image or some shit. Then he had to walk around the penthouse not punching things for a couple minutes after JARVIS told him the van plate traced directly back to Hammer Industries. They’d used a van out of the goddamn vehicle pool at the main office in New York. Now he had to try to figure out if Hammer really was that fucking stupid (of course he was) or if the van was stolen and used to distract them, rile them up, or cause more chaos. Or some variation on all those. Probably all the variations. Hammer would certainly claim it was stolen.
So there was an all-Avengers meeting slated for dinner time and the executive chef was throwing together dinner with like two hours’ notice and he’d sent down five figures in bonuses for her and the staff, as well as going down to personally thank them all, but NOT WHAT HE WANTED TO BE DEALING WITH EITHER.

Finally he took another deep breath, composed himself, and had a last look at the security feed from Pepper’s office. She was at her desk, working away. Steve sat nearby, in his suit (that Pepper had bought him, so he looked damned good), doing something that was probably drawing on a pad of paper.

Right. Everyone home safe, except for his Team Delta maniacs, and deep breaths again. “JARVIS, where’s Kate right now?”

“She is in the main lab, having her arm seen to.”

Tony thought about that. Main lab meant among friends, and good for that. He went over to the bar and got a bottle of her preferred tequila, a glass, and some ice. He thought some more about the fight he’d seen on security cam, and put a straw in his pocket. Then he went to thank Hawkeye Junior for kicking ass.

The scene in the main lab was… well, it was about what he should begin to expect around here. He’d admit that having this whole bunch around made him feel a lot more secure, but there were a lot of… PEOPLE… now. Disrupting everything.

The entire science crew had gathered. Kate was laid out on a lab bench covered in pillows; given the décor it should have felt like Doctor Frankenstein, but he swore it was more like an upscale day spa, or a pagan sacrifice. Maybe because of the classical music playing and Sidekick curled up on Kate’s chest, and Lucky laying along her right side. Skye, at Kate’s feet, was doing what sure as hell looked like a pedicure. Kate was wearing men’s style purple silk pajamas which also added a nice spa touch to it all. He was pretty sure someone was doing aromatherapy. He smelled lavender.

Bruce was leaning against a wall, watching it all with bemusement. Tony caught his eye and they traded confused looks. Twenty years of womanizing, over a decade working with and a few more devoted to an outspoken woman who told him EXACTLY what was on her mind at any given moment, and Tony still didn’t have the first damned clue about understanding women. But if it wasn’t for them, the world in general and this little world in the Tower in particular would be a lot harder, so he welcomed the new female overlords.

Kate’s left arm – the one that had been cut – was laid out over a pillow-covered exam table, and Jemma was crouched over it wearing a surgical mask, with magnifiers and micro-sutures all over. Leo stood by to mop her brow or hand over equipment. Kate’s other hand, used for a couple major roundhouses, was elevated on pillows and towels and covered in ice packs. Her head was tilted back so another ice pack could be applied to her face, where she’d apparently caught a fist to the left eye.

All in all, considering she’d recently come from a brawl and was receiving medical treatment, the whole thing was very female and decadent. He was impressed. Maybe if he asked nicely HE could get this treatment after his next fight. In fact, aromatherapy and foot massage should be required. For everyone. He was going to look into that. An experienced masso-therapist on staff wasn’t a bad idea either.

Tony walked over on her right side, taking care to be noisy enough for her to hear him coming. (He’d learned the hard way what being quiet would get him, with Clint. What it got him was flipped over and pinned face-first to the floor.) He couldn’t bring himself to be his usual abrasive self with her. Couldn’t. Even though he knew she enjoyed it. “Nice work, Bishop.”
Lucky raised his head, thumped his tail a couple times, and laid his head back down on Kate’s shoulder. She cracked her good eye open, gave a slight grin. “Thanks.”

Tony held up the bottle.

“Oh god, YES.” she replied, so he sat everything down, and poured her one, stuck the straw in it so she wouldn’t have to move.

He regretted not grabbing a little umbrella for it. He held it up to her mouth and she took a swig and sighed with pleasure. Tony REALLY missed that feeling. He woke up at night once in a while, remembering it. Well, not the time. “Thank you.” he said evenly, simply. That would probably make the most impact and might be taken seriously.

Kate cracked her eye again. “You know she could have kicked all four of their asses.”

“You helped keep her secret.” Tony pointed out. That, more than anything, humbled him. That she stepped up and got hurt, not even to save Pepper, but just to maintain her privacy.

Kate seemed to think about that. “She’s amazing, you know. She’s taught me so much. I didn’t even think when I saw them following us. Besides, isn’t that what I’m supposed to be doing?”

Tony held up the drink again. “We knew you were qualified to be a bodyguard, but Pepper doesn’t really need one any more. She mostly took you on because she thinks the world needs more badass female executives and she wanted to mold you in her image.”

That got a broad, beaming smile Tony had only ever seen once before, when he handed out the Avengers’ communicators.

“Well, either way, she’s a good boss and a friend, so of course I stepped in.”

Tony patted her gently on the shoulder, patted the dog who looked like he expected it, and poured her some more tequila.

“You know,” Jemma said from the other side of Kate, “a couple glugs on top of the drug cocktail I gave her is utter rubbish for her liver.”

“It’ll fall out, go squish on the floor.” Leo said, deadpan. “Trust me. I’ve been told.”

“But I feel sooooo good.” Kate said with a laugh.

-A-

Steve waited until everyone had eaten, and then turned to the wall screen. “JARVIS?” A wonderful picture of Pepper punching a big guy in a black suit appeared. “Nice work, Pepper. And Kate.” The photo shifted to Kate doing a Natasha-worthy move, back-kicking one of the guys in the crotch. “Looks like it hurt.”

Everyone applauded. Pepper and Kate grinned.

“You okay?” He asked Kate. There was a bruise coming up along the outside edge of her eye, and her knuckles were dark.

She nodded. “Fine. Thanks to Jemma, I think even my tat will make it.”

Women with tattoos. He would never adjust to this time. Every time he thought he had a grip, something else turned up. Women with tattoos. Pretty ones, but tattooed like sailors. With flowers.
“Oh, well.” Jemma said, smiling. “I need to drop my mum a thank you for making me learn embroidery, I guess.”

“So what do we know?” Steve asked everyone.

Tony rubbed his hands over his face in a way that meant bad news, so Steve braced himself. “The van that pulled up in the middle of the… whatever that was, attempted kidnapping? ass kicking? is registered to the Hammer Industries motor pool, New York office.”

“You have GOT to be kidding.” Pepper said.

“Is he that stupid?” Steve asked Tony.

“Yes.” Said Pepper, Tony, and interestingly, Bruce.

“When questioned, he’ll say that he knew nothing about it, and he can’t be responsible for every vehicle registered to his corporation.” Tony told the table at large.

“Which is true.” Pepper admitted, “so legally we’d be on shaky ground.”

“So I should have hit them harder.” Kate concluded.

“Yes.” Said Tony and Pepper together.

“What do the men say?” Steve asked, before things could devolve further.

“They are currently hospitalized. Two of them are unable to speak due to damage to their throats, the third is in surgery with the hopes of locating his testicles again, and the fourth is unable to speak due to a broken jaw.” Tony said. “The Stark lawyers and the cops are questioning the three who are conscious, but they need to write down any answers they have and don’t seem too interested in sharing information with us.”

“Oops.” Kate replied.

Several people started giggling.

“Can it.” Steve told them. “What are the odds this is Hydra, distracting us? They have to know we’re still looking for them, even if they don’t know we’re looking for the scepter. Kidnapping Pepper would make a hell of a distraction from that, for all of us.”

Tony seemed to haul up short and really think. “Huh. Could be. Hammer would sell weapons to Hydra, he’s got the morals of a hyena. And if Hydra told him to create some chaos, he’d probably go for Pepper, he’s still pretty mad at her over the Vanko thing.”

Pepper scoffed. “I’m not the one who broke his face, that was Natasha.”

“I want to hear that story later.” Darcy requested.

Steve gave her a look, and turned back to Pepper. “So you didn’t cross him? It was Natasha?”

“Well.” Pepper smiled slightly. “I did call the cops. And tell them to arrest him.”

“And we have a winner.” Tony sighed.

“Increased security, of course, other thoughts?” Steve asked them all.
“Want me to hack them?” Skye asked.

Tony shook his head. “Don’t see the point. You’re already busy with the SHIELD servers, and Hammer might be a moron but he’s smart enough not to put Hydra information on his computers. Not the kind of information we need. Hydra isn’t stupid enough to tell him anything useful.”

They all looked at each other. For the life of him, Steve couldn’t think of anything else to do, so “Time to bring in SHIELD?”

Everyone scowled, but nodded. “I hate to say it, but yes.” Tony grumbled. “You and me, pay Nick a visit tomorrow?” He asked Steve.

“Yeah.”

“I believe I shall go later this week, in my capacity as messenger for the Allfather.” Thor mused. “Make it clear how very seriously Asgard is taking this. Unless you’ve other ideas?” he asked them all.

“No, that sounds great, strategically.” Steve confirmed. “He needs to remember you’re not only an Avenger, and can make his life a disaster, without our help at all.”

Thor smiled. “I do enjoy diplomacy. With that in mind, if I could have everyone’s attention in the living room after dinner, I have a small announcement.”

Steve wondered what THAT was about, but “of course.” What else was he going to say, to a teammate and friend, as well as the Messenger of the Allfather?

-A-

At the time, Darcy had mostly agreed to a formal announcement of her working with Thor because she figured it would reduce questions and having to explain it a hundred times over. Now that the time was here, she felt completely stupid about it and wished she’d dressed up. What did you wear to throw in with a space alien who was the crown prince of another dimension? Evening gown? Tiara? Slacks and a sweater, which she had on, didn’t feel formal enough. Thor said it didn’t matter. Showed what Thor knew. Obviously he needed her desperately.

So after dinner, everyone shuffled back to the living room, and everyone except she and Thor sat down, and she stood there like a dork, and Thor kicked into storytelling mode. Good god, she hoped she wasn’t here forever. She glared at him and he seemed to get the hint and cleared his throat.

“When my people travel out into the realms, we often find those who aid us on our way. Those who are very kind, and very helpful, we make members of our household. It is a rare honor we bestow, to those who should have the respect not only of Asgard, but all the realms. The title is Vinur, Friend. Darcy has done more than any other beside Jane to help me in this realm, and so I bestow this title on her, with her badge of office.” He pulled the necklace out of his pocket and everyone gasped. It looked a lot like the old torcs that the Celts wore, coils of metal twisted into something like a rope, finishing in jeweled ends that hung down toward the front. Thor looped it around her neck, touched the two major jewels in the front (if they were rubies, they were worth more than she wanted to know about), and there was a click. It felt like a circuit closing, or a sudden shift in the weather.

Thor had explained it wouldn’t come off again until one of them denounced her role or the two of them “amiably parted”.

That was it, thankfully. Thor hugged her, then Jane came up and did the same. Sam was next,
grinning. He gave her a handshake, then a hug.

There were more congratulations, and people looked slightly intimidated which was annoying, and Pepper, bless her, got out some champagne and after that it was really nice.

-A-

They were finishing up the usual breakfast routine the next morning and JARVIS spoke up and said “Sir, you have a call.”

That was weird. Sam had been there about a week and that had never happened before. The way everyone froze, apparently it was not a good thing?

Tony took the call on his cell. “Stark.”

There was a long pause. His face looked more and more infuriated.

“What do you mean DEAD.” he demanded.

More silence. Everyone was giving each other shifty looks.

Tony hung up on whoever was on the phone, dropped his head forward, pushed the heel of the hand not holding his phone to his forehead and breathed for a minute.

Everyone waited in silence.

Finally Tony turned back to them. “That was the NYPD. It seems that all four of yesterday’s goons are dead. Found this morning in their hospital rooms. No obvious cause of death, autopsies to be done, assuming the incompetent motherfuckers can keep track of the bodies long enough.”

Steve rose swiftly. “I’ll go put on a suit and follow Pepper around today.”

Tony gave him a look of pure gratitude. “Thanks.”

“No problem. Maybe we’ll switch off with Thor or someone for the appointment with Fury this afternoon. We’ll work it out.”

Tony nodded. Steve left.

“Probably Hydra?” Sam asked.

“Probably.” Tony decided. “Who else is this heavy-handed? Killing the guys? In the hospital?”

“What would they have had to say, I wonder?” Thor asked idly.

Tony seemed to do some of his light-speed thinking, then he turned to Thor. “Can you sit with Pepper for a while? I’m going to grab Steve and we’re going to swing over to bug the shit out of Fury now. I don’t want to wait.”

“Of course. I regret I do not have proper clothing.” Thor said.

“We’ll fix that for next time. For now, what you have on is fine.”

Thor was wearing jeans and a flannel shirt and looked like a long-haired lumberjack. He gave a nod to Tony and left, walking with purpose.
“JARVIS, tell Steve to meet me in the garage, we’re talking to Fury now.”

“Of course, Sir.” JARVIS replied.

Tony turned to everyone still at the table. “You guys have this, right? No mayhem, stay in the building, follow security directions? Don’t do anything stupid? Sam definitions of stupid, not me definitions.”

Everyone nodded, and he left.

“Shit.” Sam muttered.

“This is not good.” Bruce agreed. Betty laid a hand on his arm, and Bruce covered it with one of his own.

-I-

“I know we’re trying to be law-abiding and all that jazz,” Tony muttered to Steve as they entered the SHIELD lobby, “but if Fury doesn’t cooperate, I’m dragging Hammer in here myself for questioning.”

“I’ll help.” Steve said back softly. This was going to be quite a balancing act, keeping Fury and Tony from each others’ throats without losing his temper, himself.

Tony strode straight to the desk. “Nick Fury, please. Tell him he’s got five minutes before we come looking for him.”

The receptionist, who Steve felt kind of sorry for, took in Tony in his beat-up tee shirt and jeans and work boots, and Steve in his hand-tailored business suit, and picked up the phone, looking nervous. There was an extended conversation, and finally Tony leaned over and gently took the phone from her hand and held it to his ear. “Nick, let us upstairs to talk to you or I’ll start discussing it right here and now and I doubt it’s stuff you want the rank and file to hear the details of.”

He put the phone down with no further comment, so one of them had hung up on the other.

Steve would prefer giving Fury the chance to refuse action before going on the attack, but given Tony’s history, he wasn’t going to argue, with as stressed Tony was at the moment. They stood there, Tony glaring at random people and Steve simply waiting, until most of Strike Team Bravo showed up. “We’re here to escort you, sir.”

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Steve knew the leader in passing, had shared a few casual meals with him in the cafeteria over the years. He assumed they’d all been vetted to the moon after the Hydra thing came out, so, “Sure, Quartermain. Lead the way.”

The guy nodded gratefully – Steve was sure his takedown of Alpha Strike had made the rounds by then – and the men fell in around Steve and Tony as they walked to the elevator.

In the ‘vator, Tony asked sarcastically, “Is this really necessary?”

Given Steve’s history in elevators, the men all kind of cringed. Quartermain looked thoughtful for a moment and then, surprisingly, told Tony “Given Cap’s here, I don’t really see a point in it, myself, but the boss told us to escort you to his office, so here we are.”

That took the wind out of Tony’s sails; he was usually pretty good about not giving hell to the everyday folks following orders. “Oh, fine.” he grumbled.
Steve and Tony got off on Nick’s floor, and Quartermain and the rest stayed in the elevator. “This is as far as we were told to take you. You know the way.” He threw a… salute? “Nice work on Team Alpha, sir.”

Steve saluted back before he even thought about it. “Thanks.” They nodded at each other and the doors closed and Steve reflected on how many friends he might still have at SHIELD.

“Team Alpha?” Tony asked idly.

Nick’s admin told them to sit. He was going to be manipulative and make them wait. Okay then, since they had time to tell stories. “Strike Team Alpha. Sort of like Strike Team Delta, except where Delta is covert, extremely skilled, and subtle to the point of invisibility, Alpha was a large, overt, blunt instrument.”

“Was?”

“Hydra.”

“Ah.” Tony nodded at that. “And what did you do to them?”

Steve let himself grin a little bit. “Beat the crap out of them.” he cleared his throat to cover a laugh. “There’s probably some elevator footage on the servers around here somewhere you’d find entertaining.” In retrospect, Bravo had to be on the side of the angels, to be willing to get on the ‘vator with him.

“Oh, I bet I would.” Tony pulled out his phone, and from the looks of it, started looking for the footage right then and there. “How many guys?”

“I don’t know, ten?” Since Nick hadn’t seen fit to see them yet… “Find the footage from the bridge, too. At the Triskelion. It’ll be labeled something… apocalyptic.”

Tony stared at him and started laughing. “Did you do that direct attack without a plan thing that you tell me not to do?”

Well, when he put it that way, “...maybe.”

The office door was thrown open and Nick snarled “Get your asses in here already.”

That had taken less time than expected. They stood up and went in. Steve leaned against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, and let Tony take the lead. Even in the mood he was in, Tony was better at negotiation than he was.

And in Tony’s current mood, he went straight to the point. “Where’s Justin Hammer?”

“What are you talking about, Stark?” Nick asked.

Pure denial; that might work with most, but it was only going to piss Tony off. Steve shook his head and sighed sadly, hoping Nick caught it.

“You had to have noticed the kidnapping attempt on Pepper yesterday afternoon. Given there are a million photos on line I’m sure you followed the van back to Hammer Industries and have some plan to deal with the sonofabitch. So what. Is. It.”

“Yeah, that footage.” Nick allowed. “It was interesting. Kate Bishop. I figured she was some socialite her daddy got in as an intern, but I should have known better. Where DID she learn Black
Widow moves, I wonder?”

Steve laid a hand on Tony’s shoulder to silence him. This one was his. He stepped forward, and leaned over Nick’s desk, placing his fists precisely on the surface and pushing down until they both heard the wood creak. “Kate Bishop is one of us.” That got some quickly-masked surprise, good. “As such, she is under our protection. All of us. Including ME. ESPECIALLY me.” He snarled the last bit, letting his temper show. Nick looked a bit worried. He stepped back and stood next to Tony.

“Also she saved Pepper yesterday,” Tony added. “Not only is she one of us, but I owe her a PERSONAL FAVOR. You know the kind of stuff I do for people I feel grateful to, Nick.” Nick almost winced.

“So, last time.” Tony said with an impressive amount of menace. “Where is Justin Hammer? You don’t play with us on this, we’ll go find him ourselves. If we need to shred your holding cells and sub-level floors, well, I think most of the Avengers would enjoy that right now.”

“I know I would.” Steve allowed. “I’m still carrying a grudge about you trying to use Bucky against me, Nick. We’ve all got a long list of reasons we’re angry at SHIELD. So instead of trying to work this somehow in your favor, how about instead you WORK THIS and we deal with it like mature adults? We’ll do it if you will.”

Nick glared at both of them for a long moment, and finally said “We’ve got him in a holding cell downstairs. He’s not talking. Keeps demanding a lawyer. Our best interrogator jumped ship a while back, but the ones we have can’t get anything out of him. Maybe if you want to bring her over here, we’d get somewhere.”

“Black Widow isn’t available. But we have someone who is.” Steve pulled out his phone.

“Still looking for Barnes? I told you, your people come back-”

It’s as far as he got before Tony slammed a gauntlet-clad fist into Nick’s desk, making quite an impressive dent. “Quit working this and be useful, or we’ll find a way to work around you. Permanently.” Tony snarled.

Steve knew he should lecture Tony on manners about now, but really he wanted to slam his own fist into Nick’s desk and he tried not to be a hypocrite. He sighed and dialed on his fancy new communicator phone gizmo.
More threats, with fun but unneeded violence.

Chapter Summary

Kate strolled over and punched him. Not much harder than they’d been smacking him, more like she bumped him with her fist. Hammer’s reaction was complete terror. Sensing it, Kate leaned on the wall behind him and began tapping her foot.

Chapter Notes

Possible TW - physical intimidation, I guess it could meet the legal criteria for torture, but not really? And it's JUSTIN HAMMER. So, I mean. Sheesh.

Her day was mostly filled with paperwork and reports – both of which she hated – because after the kidnapping attempt Tony and Steve had canceled all her appointments without telling her. Her private line rang and Steve’s name and photo popped up, so she answered with “You better not have canceled all my appointments for the rest of the week.”

“Uh.” Steve said. He was always adorable when at a loss, yet trying to be polite. “I don’t think so?”

“What do you need?”

“Justin Hammer is currently being held here at SHIELD. He’s not talking. I wondered if maybe you and Kate wanted to have a go. If he hates you, you should be able to rattle him, I’d think.”

“Plus he’s intimidated by women.” She added.

“I don’t know anything about that.” Steve said dryly, and she laughed.

It wasn’t like she had anything better to do. “I’ll gather up Kate and Thor and be over. Will they be expecting me?”

“I’ll make sure of it.”

She hung up. “Field trip, gang. They’re holding Justin Hammer at SHIELD and we get to go have a chat with him.”

Thor stood, grabbing Mjolnir. “I will happy to escort you, my lady.”

Kate perked up. “Do I get to slap him around?”

“I get to do the slapping. You’re not supposed to pull your stitches, remember?”

“I don’t see how I could, Jem put a layer of super glue over the whole thing, it’s fine.”

Pepper doubted that. “Maybe. But remember executive privilege. If anyone gets to hit him, it’s going
Kate looked disappointed, and Thor laughed, sincerely entertained, as he held the door for them.

-A-

The SHIELD offices in New York were the same as the ones in Los Angeles; deliberately decorated in Late Industrial Dismal. She knew that as much as the flooring and other things had cost, they could have made it more personable if they wanted to. At least throw in a few plants.

This was what came of worrying about image over people. Well, she didn’t have to work in the hellhole. She shook her head to herself and strode into the lobby, followed closely by Thor and Kate at her back. Giving it her best CEO look and walk, she strode over to the reception desk and announced “Pepper Potts for Nick Fury.” Then she put her nose in the air some, for the hell of it.

A very large dark-skinned man stepped forward. “Ma’am? I’m Agent Quartermain, here to take you to Cap and Mister Stark.”

He looked open and honest, and, well, if he wasn’t, God help him. “Very well.” she said, and stepped into the elevator with him. It started dropping. She couldn’t tell how many floors, and the counter over the numbers was blank. The door opened onto a grey cement and steel hallway stretching into the distance; Pepper wondered for a moment how deep they were if the subway wasn’t playing hell with them, and then if they had the permits needed to be doing this sort of thing.

If she ever got bored she’d set some of the SI lawyers on it.

Agent Quartermain led them down a hall and opened a door, and there were Steve and Tony and Fury, looking through glass into a small room where Justin Hammer was seated at a table. “Thanks, Quartermain.” Steve said.

“No problem, Cap.” The agent replied, looking like he wanted to salute. He ducked out, and then it was the six of them, staring at Hammer.

“Why is he still in a suit?” Pepper asked.

“We were supposed to strip him?” Fury asked sarcastically.

“No, you were supposed to process him as a prisoner and shove him in an orange jumpsuit after you fingerprinted him, for maximum intimidation. You know how to play this better than I do, so what are you doing?” Pepper demanded.

Everyone stared at Fury. “I figured you would be by eventually and thought I’d leave you to it.” he said with a shrug.

Something was going on here, and Steve and Tony were frowning at Nick too. They didn’t know either.

Thankfully the shoes she’d put on that day were exactly the right height; she stepped forward into Fury’s space, and kept walking until their chests were touching and she was glaring into his eye. “If I find out you are involved in this in any way, or are playing this to harm Stark Industries in any way, I will come after you, personally. Whatever the Avengers do about it will be beside the point; I will send the entirety of Stark Industries’ might after you. Do we understand each other?”

“We do.” Fury said evenly.
She stepped back and nodded. “Fine. Kate, with me. Like we discussed in the car.”

“Got it.” Kate replied.

They both stepped into the room. Hammer glanced up, then gaped at her, and finally demanded “What are you doing here?”

“You don’t get to ask questions.” Kate said, and slapped him in the head. It was a half-hearted dope slap, with very little impact. The guys hit each other harder, horsing around during dinner. Sadly. She went and stood with her back to the door, arms crossed.

“What the hell?” Hammer yelped, patting at his hair.

Pepper, indulging herself a little, slapped him in the head again, being careful with her strength. “That was another question.”

Her hearing was more sensitive with Extremis and she was almost positive she could hear Tony laughing in the outer room.

Pepper sat down across from Hammer, resisted the urge to punch him in the face for real, and began. “Kidnapping. Yesterday. Who put you up to it?”

“What are you talking about? Is that why I’m here?”

She slapped him twice more, barely connecting. She REALLY didn’t want to accidentally break his face. The idea was to frighten him, not damage him, and given what a coward he was, it shouldn’t take much. “Two more questions. You’re supposed to be giving answers.”

They weren’t even hitting him that hard, they wanted him to stay conscious for heavens’ sake. Really, Pepper and Kate didn’t have the stomachs for torture or anything close to it. On the drive over they had readily agreed with each other that no matter how much he deserved it, neither had the desire to cause Hammer any real harm. Even Kate, who cheerfully broke faces, wasn’t up for doing it to someone simply sitting in a chair and not threatening anyone. It was all coming down to image; they were trying to be scary, not following Hammer’s stereotype of what women should be, and it apparently was working. He was carrying on like they were trying to kill him. Wuss. They weren’t even leaving marks.

“This is crap. I’m Justin Hammer! You can’t have me dragged out of my office and shoved in a little room because some big scary men grabbed you yesterday.”

“The big scary men never touched me. What role did you play? Start answering questions.”

“I want a lawyer.”

Kate strolled over and punched him. Not much harder than they’d been smacking him, more like she bumped him with her fist. Hammer’s reaction was complete terror. Sensing it, Kate leaned on the wall behind him and began tapping her foot.

Hammer hunched over, trying to look over his shoulder. “I haven’t been read my rights. I want a phone call. My rights have been vio-“

Kate punched him again. Lightly, to spare her stitches.

Pepper was sure she heard Tony and Thor laughing now.
“We can do this all day.” Pepper said.

That was Steve, laughing.

“I didn’t have anything to do with it!” Hammer insisted.

Pepper smacked him herself this time.

“STOP HITTING ME.” Hammer bellowed.

Kate punched him in the back of the head.

The only person Pepper couldn’t hear laughing behind the window, at this point, was Fury.

“Kidnapping. Details. Now. It was your van.”

“I’m not responsible for every vehicle in the motor pool, for that you want to kidnap someone in HR, probably.”

Kate smacked him again. “I’m getting tired of hitting him.” She told Pepper.

“Next time you can kick him.” She told Kate. Kate would nudge him with her foot and he’d think it was a homicide attempt.

“ALL RIGHT.” Hammer shouted. “Fine! Hydra gave me some money and told me to distract Stark.”

Now they were getting somewhere. “And so you decided kidnapping me was the way to go?”

“I’ve wanted to kill you since Vanko, you bitch.”

This time Kate DID hit him for real, and he slammed face first into the table from the force of it. “Oh, sorry Ms Potts, I was supposed to kick him, right?” Kate said in her ditzy voice.

“That was fine, thank you.” Pepper said gravely. Given Kate had broken someone’s jaw yesterday, that still hadn’t been a full-force hit. “Try to remember to kick him next time.”

“One day I will end you.” Hammer whined, holding a hand to his bleeding nose.

“It won’t be today. How did Hydra have your phone number?”

“I don’t have to answer that.” Hammer said, trying to sound tough.

“You’re right.” Pepper decided. They had the information they’d come for, this was now Fury’s problem. “I’ll let the real interrogators take over. If you thought this was scary, wait until you meet them.”

She rose and Kate opened the door. No one tried to be quiet and Hammer turned purple at the sound of the laughter when they left. The door shut and Hammer was alone again, bleeding and unhappy.

“I believe this is your problem now.” Pepper told Fury. “If he winds up back out on the street, I’m blaming you.”

“So am I.” Steve added.

“That was beautiful and I am the luckiest man alive.” Tony told her, meaning it. Aw. He gave her a
quick kiss. “Lunch? I think we need lunch. Mario’s sounds good.”

Mario adored Tony and would let them in early, with the odd assortment of outfits they were all wearing. It was barely mid-morning.

“I could eat.” She decided, hooked her arm through Tony’s and strode out.

“Remember what I said.” Steve told Fury, and then the rest followed.

“That was most entertaining.” Thor said, loudly enough to carry back to Fury, when they were almost to the elevator. He loved diplomacy.

-A-

They’d eaten an enormous lunch full of laughter and red wine, toasting Pepper and Kate repeatedly. The owner had opened the restaurant a little early for them, and they stayed for hours, then staggered back to the tower in early afternoon. (Given that the waitress had stuttered and asked Tony if he’d meant to put so many zeros on her tip, Steve assumed they’d been paid well for their time and extra effort.) Darcy was waiting for them at the coffee bar in the executive lobby when they walked in. She got straight to the point, as she usually did. “Can I borrow Steve for an hour or two? Thor can keep up with the bodyguard deal, right, Thor?”

“As my lady wishes.” He agreed, with a flourishing bow and slight laugh. He’d had an amazing amount of wine with lunch, and had gotten into the toasting spirit, producing long-winded, ridiculously funny salutes to both women.

“We should be out and back in an hour or so, depending on traffic.” Darcy told Pepper apologetically. “I’ve got a driver lined up.”

“Take your time.” Pepper said. She’d also had quite a bit of wine at lunch. “These guys have ruined my schedule today anyway. I might go take a nap.”

“Thanks!” Darcy said brightly. She hooked her arm through Steve’s and turned them back toward the entrance. “Nice suit. I almost don’t recognize you.”

“Thanks. I was meant to be bodyguarding Pepper and got sidetracked. So many people don’t recognize me I might do it more often.” Steve gave her a sideways glance. “Nice scarf.” It was covering up her fancy necklace.

“I’m afraid I’ll get mugged without it.” she said under her breath. “I’m afraid to find out what the stones are in it, because if it’s rubies, it’s close to priceless.”

He hadn’t thought of the actual value of the piece. Yikes. “Are you going to tell me where we’re going?” He asked without much hope as he held the car door for her.

“No.”

Right then.

They wound up at some dingy little building in lower Manhattan, one of the old ones he loved with the creaky floors and smell of dust. It was some kind of retail establishment, and when they opened the door, an old-fashioned bell jingled, and… “Oh.”

Darcy started laughing. “I want to make a joke about sex noises, but you’d blush.”
Steve tried not to blush, and stared into the space, jaw hanging. “Wow.” It was an art supply store. From the looks of it, they had everything he could possibly need and a bunch of new stuff he’d never seen before.

“Think they’ve got what you need?” Darcy said cheerfully. “You really need a hobby, dude. Start shopping.”

For the first time in years he felt like he COULD paint. The possibilities here were endless. He turned to Darcy. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” She said, smiling happily at him.

He kissed her on the cheek. He had to. “No, really, thanks. This is amazingly thoughtful and kind.” Then he went to grab some good paper and charcoal before he loaded up on canvases and paints.

Darcy trailed behind him. “I did some research,” she said.

“Of course you did.” He happily filled a shopping basket with pads of paper and different kinds of charcoal and pencils. “About what?” He placed the basket on the front counter with a quick explanation to the staffer there, got a smile, and left it to fill another basket with paint. He got there, and stalled.

“Different kinds of paint.” Darcy said.

“Acrylic?” He asked.

“Sometime in the fifties or sixties, wacky artists started using a kind of quick-drying glue as a pigment carrier, instead of oil. There’s also a bunch of new pigments.”

“That’s really wacky.” Steve agreed, not taking his eyes off all the tubes of color. He went to the oil section. Get his skills back with tools he knew, THEN play with the strange new materials.

“Also lead white is gone. You want titanium white.”

Steve nodded, grabbed a large tube of it. “Is it the same? They tried to sell us on all kinds of lead substitutes and none of them worked.”

“I don’t know, but you can’t get lead white any more so you’ll have to suck it up.”

He glanced back at her. “Can’t get it?”

“No. Lead.” She held up her hands. “Take it up with the FDA. Also there’s no cadmium anything, and forget real vermilion.”

Some of the old pigments were still available; prices were insane. Well, he could afford it, since Tony was letting him live rent-free. There were synthetics available too, even in oils, that were priced reasonably enough so why not mess around with them? He loaded up. He was glad to see Windsor and Newton were still around, and went with them. “What else did you study?”

“There’s a book. You’ll like it. I’ll give it to you.”

Steve laughed with happiness, dropped the second basket on the counter, asked Darcy to hold his coat, and went for brushes and canvas.

-A-
Sam was kicked back in his idiotically luxurious apartment, watching some compilation of great moments in basketball that JARVIS had put together for him, and he was living the high life. Custom wings, amazing food, electronics of the gods. The gym was like a palace. Black Widow let him call her Nat and was working with him on hand to hand. He went running with Captain America, just call him Steve, in the mornings. Sam put his feet up on the table (his momma wasn’t there, now, was she?) and basked.

Someone knocked on the door.

Hm.

When opened, the door was full of Steve Rogers, looking… intent and happy? Okay, he could work with that. “What’s up, man?”

“Can I come in? I might need to borrow your living room.”

“Ah. Sure?” There wasn’t enough other space in the building? But whatever.

Steve brushed past, walked through to the wide windows that made up one wall, paced along them, held his hand out and… stared at his palm for a second? Squinted around. “This is pretty good. Can I borrow this?”

Sam wondered if JARVIS was recording this for some kind of blooper reel. “Uh. Borrow what?”

“The space.” He looked around. “I’d have to lay a tarp… got one, though.”

“Steve.” Steve made kind of a noise, turning slowly, looking at things Sam was not seeing. “STEVE.”

He jerked a bit, looked at Sam. “What?”

“What in the hell?”

Steve seemed to catch himself, grinned a little. A grin Sam had never seen before. “Darcy took me out for a bunch of painting stuff a while ago. I was setting up, but the light’s not quite right in my place. This works, though, here by the windows. We can trade apartments, or-”

Darcy had found him something to do other than kill punching bags. Something that by all accounts made Steve happy. Be damned. “How about you use the space for now, we’ll see how things go.”

“Fair enough. Thanks.” Steve went back down the hall to his apartment. There was a pause, then here he came again with an easel and a small table.

Sam got out of the way. “Where’s Sidekick?”

“With Darcy. She kept trying to gnaw the paint tubes. Sidekick, not Darcy. God knows what’s in some of these pigments, got to find a way to stop her doing that.” Steve said absently, laying out a tarp and setting up the easel and table. Back down the hall for canvas and a box of stuff, looked like brushes and tubes and the usual.

“Right. I’ll, just-”

Steve looked up, suddenly intense, paying actual attention to Sam for the first time. “I’m chasing you out. Go watch TV or whatever in my place for now, once I’m set up I’ll be pretty quiet, I swear.”

Because Steve was such a quiet, still kind of person.
"I’ll see about that.” He kind of wanted to stay and watch Steve paint. He’d never seen the guy this intently cheerful toward anything, and never intent at all unless it involved punching fascists. “Right now I need to go talk to someone.”

“Okay. Come back when you’re done, I’ll be like a church mouse.”

Church mouse. Sure.

-A-

After her field trip with Steve, Darcy went back to her usual daily ‘grind’, this time with Sidekick riding her shoulder. She understood the appeal to Steve, finally; the purring was very soothing. Being a cat, Sidekick had wanted to get into the paints. Um, no.

When Darcy had moved in with Jane and come to work at the Tower, she’d taken over the reception area on the lab floor with Pepper’s encouragement. ‘Encouragement’ in Pepper’s world meant boxes of office equipment and supplies, the sudden installation of a fully stocked kitchen off to one side (walls and major appliances appeared literally overnight, surreal was not the word), and her own PERSONAL ASSISTANT. They had been banished to the Avengers’ public floor to fill out patent applications, file stuff, and make phone calls. Because that? Freaked her out. Personal assistant. She was supposed to BE the PA, not HAVE a PA.

With a little thought, she called down to Supplies and had them send up an old-school paper-tray in box, and lined it with one of Steve’s already-worn tee shirts. (Talking him out of that had been an experience. With luck he wouldn’t have her arrested later.) Sidekick was curled up in an adorable little ball in her very own bed that smelled like her human now, alternately sleeping and being petted, on the corner of Darcy’s desk.

Darcy and JARVIS had worked out an arrangement with a bluetooth headset ear thing that she could wear and speak to him quietly rather than having to talk to him loudly enough for the entire room to hear, and they were going through the day’s social media highlights (someone got photos of her with Steve at the art supply store) when Sam showed up with a vase full of wildly-colored flowers of all kinds and sat them on the desk in front of her.

“Ooo. Flowers.” She said without thinking. Because flowers! Really awesome flowers, actually. Were they from Sam? Was he delivering them? There was a card. She pulled it, flipped it open. ‘You do good work. S.’ She squinted up at him over her glasses. “They’re from you? I’m not missing that?”

Sam dropped into the chair she’d put beside the desk for chatting with people in these situations. “I try to reward good behavior. Steve Rogers just crashed into my apartment and took over half of the living room because the light in his place is wrong for painting.”

Hot damn. “Yes!” she pumped a fist in the air. “I am good.” she gloated.

Sam absentmindedly started petting Sidekick – everyone did that when they sat there, she was going to start borrowing the cat when Steve was out – and gave her a very flattering look of respect.

“When I met Steve Rogers, I asked him what he did for fun and he said he didn’t know.”

“See?” Darcy agreed. “Destroying punching bags doesn’t count.”

“I keep forgetting you aren’t in psych, you’re so good with people.” Sam told her. “No hobbies, nothing fun, no OUTLET. That’s… I was worried. Really worried.”

Eek. She hadn’t known Steve was in such bad shape that the psych professionals were concerned.
“Wow. I hadn’t realized it was like that. It’s… I manage people, you know? I can’t help it.”

“I’ve noticed.” Sam agreed.

“He drifts around here, looking lost most of the time, and in a, well, it’s a really nice cell and I’m not arguing the necessity, but he’s in a cell with James the rest. It can’t be good.”

“It isn’t.” Sam agreed. “You do excellent work.” He held out a fist.

Darcy bumped it. “Damn right I do. That’s why you’re gonna help me talk to the Avengers about social media tonight.”

“Sweet baby Jesus.”


-A-

Kate was drinking hot chocolate when he got to his office, and there was a mug waiting across the table for him. “JARVIS mentioned it. Chocolate sounded good.”

“Chocolate always sounds good.” Sam agreed, and sat down. “Good work on the kidnapping yesterday, by the way.” He hadn’t had a chance to tell her, one on one, and her takedowns had been beautiful.

“Thanks.” She sighed into her mug. “I guess that’s kind of why I’m here.” She put down her mug, got up to pace around. “I don’t really know why I AM here, except to say hi I’m probably gonna need a shrink any minute now.”

Sam laughed. That made a nice change from people not showing up until they were tearing at their hair. (Tony.) “Fair enough.”

“Five years ago, Hawkeye and Black Widow decided to train me.” She shook her head. “Not getting into that today. But at the time, I thought that was the most amazing thing that would ever happen to me. Poor little rich kid; I’m not saying wealth sucks, because duh. But a lot of people look at the rich and figure we already have everything and kind of ditch out.”

That was an aspect Sam never thought of. “Sucks.”

“Eh. Every life has some suck in it, right?” Kate said with a shrug. “I’m slightly bugged by the people who think money makes the suck go away. There’s just different kinds of suck.” She waved her arms. “Not why I’m here. A couple days ago, I was made kind of a junior Avenger. That wasn’t even a goal in my life because I never thought that was a possibility, or I’d be good enough or recognized as skilled and invited to join. Out of nowhere, I’ve got Captain America treating me like a team member, and here I am now, with a hand built by Tony Stark communicator in my pocket instead of a cell phone. I… what? Yesterday, I went to lunch with Pepper Potts. THE Pepper Potts, who is the heroine of every woman on earth with a brain. We talked about clothes and girl stuff. Me. And Pepper Potts. Then we walked back to where we WORK TOGETHER and I didn’t really save her from a kidnapping, but I helped her out in a way that made her thank me.”

“It was good work.” Sam said.

Kate grinned. “Back at the tower, a group of world-renowned scientists set up a day spa in their lab so they could give me stitches and ice my hand in pleasant surroundings. Doctor Elizabeth Ross brought in her aromatherapy for me. Captain America asked me to take care of his kitten for the
afternoon. This morning I got to slap around JUSTIN HAMMER, LEGALLY. With Pepper Potts.”

Sam tried not to laugh.

“Well, I get hauled out to lunch with Pepper Potts, Tony fucking Stark, Steve Rogers, and THOR. And they all toast me and tell me I’m clever. Everyone in the restaurant was taking photos and trying to figure out who the hell I was. And Thor’s standing there with a glass lifted, talking about my beauty and intelligence and ability to kick ass in rhyming ‘courtly meter’ in his Prince Odinson voice. It was like the most bizarre poetry slam I’ve ever been to.”

Sam laughed.

She dropped back down into her chair, slugged back hot chocolate like she wanted it to be beer, and announced, “my life is fucking WEIRD. Absolutely the best, but WEIRD.”

“Well, there’s a lot of that going around.” Sam told her. “I kind of became an Avenger the same way; Captain America showed up at my back door one morning after a run. Now I have new custom wings built by Tony Stark and cooked breakfast this morning with the really nice guy who turns into the giant green dude who saved the earth during the Invasion. I can’t go blabbing about what other people tell me, but. You are not alone in your feelings. At all.”

Kate gave a half laugh. “What am I supposed to do?”

Well, there was a fine question. He hoped she told him when she figured it out. “What do you want to do?”

Kate pretended to think for a second. “Gloat.” she announced. “Quietly, to myself, but oh my god.” She grinned slightly. “Okay, and maybe gloat obviously and out loud around my older sister.”

“Sounds reasonable, under the circumstances. I say go for it. You might also want to kick this around with other baseline humans. We’re all kinda feeling this way.”

“Maybe we should form a support group.” Kate suggested.

They clinked their mugs together.

Chapter End Notes

The book Darcy gives to Steve is "Bright Earth" by Phillip Ball. It's about the history of color and art. It's the first book I'd give Steve Rogers after he thawed out.
Actual teamwork!

Chapter Summary

“You wound up on an elevator with ten special ops guys, and asked ‘Before we get started, does anyone want to get off?’ and THEN when they went berserk you beat the shit out of them. Then staged an escape from the most secure building in the world, resulting in millions in property damage. It was AWESOME.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Steve showed up late for dinner, and when he did, his hair was on end, he was barefoot in jeans and an old tee shirt spattered with flecks of grey paint, and he looked happier and more at peace than Tony had ever seen him. Darcy had showed up earlier with Sidekick on HER shoulder, what? and Steve dropped down next to her, leaning in so Sidekick could walk over to him and lay against his neck in her usual spot.

Darcy didn’t even turn her head from talking to Jane, leaning into Steve like it was the most natural thing in the world. Like they did it all the time, passing the cat back and forth.

What.

“What’s with you?” He asked Steve. Pepper kicked him under the table, and oops, okay, not the most tactful he’d ever been (which was saying something), but where had this come from?

Steve cheerfully did his usual, dishing up massive portions of everything. “Darcy took me to the most amazing art supply store today. I loaded up. Light’s wrong in my place, so I’m in Sam’s living room for now, trying to remember how to paint. It’s been great.”

Barnes, on the wall screen, looked half indulgent and half relieved. “You’re gonna be covered in paint all the time, again.”

“It’s not that bad.” Steve replied automatically, then looked at his hands – still smeared with paint – and laughed.

Laughed easily, like Tony had never seen him do before. He half wanted to hug Darcy, and half wanted to pull her hair. Barnes looked about the same, and the idea of sharing any feelings with Barnes pissed him off. Sooooo many complicated emotions, and he wasn’t even good with the simple ones. He was pondering what to say next when Pepper kicked him again, not so hard, so he shoveled food in his face and thought of England. Or something.

“So, Avengers. I’m gonna talk about social media a little bit while you’re eating and can’t argue with me.” Darcy said.

“Can’t get a quorum with Clint and Natasha gone. I say we wait until they get back.” Bruce said.

“Seconded!” everyone else yelled.

“Nice try.” Darcy scoffed. “You guys don’t even HAVE bylaws. Don’t argue this shit with the poly
sci person.”

Dammit, they’d TRIED.

“You need a social media presence.” Darcy announced. Everyone threw balled up napkins at her. Steve caught the one dinner roll thrown her way and put it on his plate without comment. Darcy patted his knee in thanks, what? “I know, I know. I’ll be happy to take care of it. Hell, I’ll enjoy it. But the world is kind of unsure about all of you, and the more we can do to make you seem like regular old people with normal lives and goals, the better.”

“We aren’t normal, so we’re pretty well f**ked.” Tony told her. Pepper kicked him again, this time accompanied by a frown. “Well we AREN’T.” he insisted.

“You’re way more normal than you think.” Darcy told them, and since she was about the only normal person there, she might be right, but Tony for one couldn’t see how. “What I have in mind is, I’ll post random positive news and obvious stuff as we go. You know, like ‘Avengers and friends headed to the Maria Stark Foundation Ball! Go fundraising, yay, helping people’ kind of stuff. When we’re doing public stuff that’s been announced, I don’t think I need to check with anyone, right? Even pictures? I’ll try to avoid any really good face shots on anyone who isn’t already a public figure. Speak up now or suffer forever.”

That didn’t sound so bad.

“I need to stay anonymous.” Kate announced. All of the science staff agreed with her, as well as Bruce. There was some discussion but Darcy agreed immediately and worked out the details.

“Candid photos around the Tower, I will check with the people in them first before I post them, does that work?”

Everyone agreed with that.

“Anything else, I would like to run through someone in SI’s PR department to make sure I’m not fucking it up.” Darcy told Pepper.

“That should work fine.” Pepper told her.

“How do we feel about giving all the Avengers the passwords to the social media accounts?” Darcy continued.

“Apprehensive.” Pepper said with a laugh.

Well, okay, yeah, imagine the trouble if Clint and, well, he himself got into some kind of bickering match on Twitter. “We could run all our stuff through JARVIS, with your parameters, keep things a little more on the level.” Tony suggested with a sigh. There was a reason he paid the PR department to run his stuff and posted about three times a year, usually about new music releases.

“That could work.” Darcy agreed. “JARV?”

When had she become so close to his AI that she gave him a nickname? She’d been here less than a month and was embedded in their lives. What?

“I would be happy to, Ms Lewis.” JARVIS confirmed.

“Cool. This is gonna be so awesome.” Darcy said, grinning.
They were doomed.

-A-

After dinner, Tony made for the penthouse, paced the living room, and said “JARVIS, give me anything on social media with Steve and Darcy.”

“Really, Tony?” Pepper demanded.

Yes, really.

“One moment,” JARVIS replied. “Invading people’s privacy takes different algorithms.”

He was surrounded by comedians. An album of photos flickered to life in front of him, and he swiped through it. Steve and Darcy, laughing together at the Met. Steve and Darcy at some little club, Darcy in a very wow dress. Steve and Darcy in an art supply store, Steve, whoa, Steve kissing Darcy as she laughed. “Did you know about this?” he asked Pepper.

“No.” Pepper said thoughtfully, going through the Met photos.

“JARVIS, run a background check on her.”

“There isn’t any need to.” Pepper interrupted. “I ran one on her when we hired her and Jane. Then ran another at Thor’s request when he arrived this last time, before he asked her to serve as his guide. Friend. Damn, I can never remember the title.”

“And?” Tony demanded.

“And there’s nothing there. Nothing questionable. Small town, completely normal early life, a couple boyfriends one at a time, good to outstanding grades at Culver, heroic actions when Thor came to town the first couple times. She’s well thought of by everyone but conservative poly sci professors, who claim she’s a socialist as if that’s a bad thing. Reading between the lines, her combination of looks and brains terrified them.”

“Horrors.” said Tony dryly, who was kind of a socialist himself, in a capitalist pig sort of way. (Hey. Unlike most people in his income bracket, he PAID his taxes. Without complaining. And encouraged more, so long as they were spent on worthwhile programs. And he didn’t rip off his employees.) He was fond of intelligent, outspoken women. If they looked like Betty Boop, icing.

“They look happy.” Pepper said. “Look at him, he’s laughing in nearly all these photos.”

Tony sat down wearily. “My emotions are so conflicted I don’t even know what I think. He should be happy.”

“He’s laughing, Tony. You saw him tonight, with the painting. She did that for him.”

He supposed that would have to do.

“No shovel speeches.” Pepper told him in That Voice.

Dammit. It was like she knew him.

-A-

They all stood, staring at the schematic; metal parts in blue, flesh in orange, veins and arteries (the real issue) in red. “The problem,” Betty said thoughtfully, “is that the whole damn thing’s plumbed
into his subclavian artery and vein. We can’t figure out how to tie them off before cutting them, and without that, odds are high he’d bleed to death if we cut first.”

“Put him in stasis, like they do for major heart surgeries? They did that to me, with the shrapnel thing.” Of course he’d also cheated and used a watered-down form of Extremis. Tony was pretty sure he had the details of the Winter Arm engraved in his retinas. He wanted the damned arm off Barnes NOW, so he could let the guy out of the Hulk Tank NOW, so he could quit feeling guilty and go back to ignoring his emotions like a normal person.

“No way to do it in a controlled manner.” Betty told him. “We’ve no idea his responses to meds, we don’t trust the incomplete Hydra records we hacked out of the SHIELD servers, and the psych aspect of it is not so great.”

“He’s been in cryo enough times he could lose it, going under or coming out. Thrashing around while we snip major arteries and veins? Not good. They probably didn’t care much if he lived or died, but since we do, it’s an issue.” Bruce translated helpfully. “We need Jemma to talk to him again, find out exactly what surgical conditions he can tolerate, while we’re trouble-shooting this whole thing. No good doing it while he’s awake if he flips out THEN instead.”

Betty made an idle agreement noise. She studied the diagram a while longer. “We need a biomechanical engineer. The closest we have is FitzSimmons, and no matter how great they are, they don’t share a brain. And you, Tony, and while YOU’RE great, you don’t have a medical degree.”

“Why don’t we try the Google method?” Bruce asked.

“Explain it to a duck?” Tony replied scornfully.

Bruce grinned. “No. Gather everyone together and explain the problem and see what ideas people have.”

Tony wanted to scoff at that, but he knew better. They were led by an art student who taught himself military strategy, after all. “Might as well.” Couldn’t hurt, and if they didn’t solve THIS exact problem, they might get ideas for other things.

“Assuming Barnes gives us permission to share this with the entire team.” Betty said with a glare.

Doctors. Always so touchy about privacy stuff. It was all just BODIES for crying out loud. “Yes, yes, and that.” Tony said with a hand wave. “We’ll do it at dinner.”

“After dinner; some people find this disturbing while they eat.” Bruce reminded him.

“Whatever.” People were weird.

-A-

He’d burrowed into his shop, finally getting his mind clear and digging into the U rebuild, bickering with Dum-E and ignoring all the people moving around the rest of the floor, pretending it was old times. For all that it was really great to have backup in all senses, sometimes there were too damn many people in his space. He got a couple of the actuators built (not easy with Dum-E squealing in his ear, telling him he was doing it wrong every five minutes) when Thor arrived.

Thor very often showed up in person rather than calling or having JARVIS do it. Tony never could figure why, but okay. “What’s up, big guy?”

“The tailor is here for a final fitting on my first suit. I was hoping you would have a look, and share
your opinion with me.” He glanced over his shoulder to where Darcy worked in the reception area, then spoke much more softly. “The Lady Darcy is peerless in all things, but perhaps another man’s opinion would help as well, you understand?”

And Thor came to him. That was damned flattering. Though who the hell else around here wore a suit regularly who he could ask? Either way, “Sure. Glad you let me know; this was the experiment to see how they fitted you, before we ordered the tux, right?”

“It is.”

Darcy stood and came along when they exited the shop, and they rode up to Thor’s floor; he shared an apartment with Jane, and Darcy had her own on the same floor. It seemed they’d taken over the unused space as a sort of common area; someone had laid beautiful, exotic rugs over the unfinished flooring and put in enormous Thor-sized couches and chairs. The walls and ceiling were painted a deep blue and someone had painted stars on the ceiling; knowing Jane, they were proper constellations.

“I can send up some decorators for this.” Tony said, waving his hand at the new space. “Probably should have thought of it myself.”

“Nah, we’ve got it.” Darcy said easily, shaking hands with Keep, the tailor.

“If it is all the same to you,” Thor said more diffidently, “we are quite enjoying doing it ourselves.”

“Nope, that’s cool. Let me know if you change your mind.” Tony shook hands with the tailor and dropped onto the enormous couch with Darcy. Thor bowed politely to the tailor and took a garment bag, disappearing into his apartment.

“How’d it go, Keep?” Tony asked.

They smiled. “He’s quite a challenge, but such a well-built, pleasant one. All of us at the shop did our best work, I must say. Kind, enthusiastic clients are hard to resist, even when they aren’t the prince of another planet.”

Thor came out of the apartment. “It is surprisingly comfortable!” he announced cheerfully. “It makes me look Midgardian.”

“No, Thor, it really doesn’t.” Darcy said with a giggle.

“At my partner’s suggestion,” Keep said politely, “We left more a more traditional amount of ease, to allow for Prince Thor’s more exuberant movement. We can, of course, take it back in if you want the contemporary snug fit.”

Tony thought that was brilliant, and would encourage Thor to keep the ease. Barefoot, he stood about six feet, six inches, and really did make a lot of big gestures. Plus he was so obviously large and fit he didn’t need a vacuum fit to show off his body. Now, he was wearing a grey suit with thread-thin dark red stripes and a matching dark red vest over a white dress shirt. It all fit him perfectly; his arms and shoulders were enormous, his waist trim, no fabric bunching or gaping. The collar of the coat fit neatly around the neck, which Tony considered a minor miracle. “Excellent work, Keep.” Tony told them. He wondered who’d made the color choices; those were brilliant as well.

Keep sort of wilted into a chair and smiled weakly. “I’m so glad.”

Darcy stood, patted them on the shoulder. “Let me go get you a drink.”
“Water, please?” Keep asked.

“Absolutely.” On her way past Thor, she fist-bumped him. “You look great, dude.”

“I do!” Thor agreed.

Tony sat near Keep and said easily, “we’re gonna need a few more suits and three tuxedos, mostly for Thor, diplomacy stuff so fairly formal, but the tuxes for two others.”

Keep looked mildly concerned. “Are they built like Thor is?”

Tony laughed. “No, they’re average-sized Midgardians, but neither have ever had a suit tailored before. Actually, let’s say four tuxes.” He decided, thinking of Clint. “The fourth one is Hawkeye. He’s normal human sized but his arms and shoulders are kinda crazy because of all the archery stuff.” He thought of Phil and the relationship they had. “I’ve got no idea if he’s been fitted for a suit before. He has a boyfriend who is into custom tailoring.”

“Oh my god, I’m fitting another Avenger?” Keep asked, taking the water Darcy offered them with a grateful nod.

“Actually, more than one. Another of the tuxes is for Sam Wilson, the guy with the wings? From DC. He’s a great guy, you’ll love him. Clueless on suits, probably, send for me when it comes to picking fabrics. Actually, do that with Leo, too.”

Keep drank their water and did breathing exercises.

“I think I need to order some day suits, too, if I’m going to be running around with Thor.” Darcy said thoughtfully, sitting down again. “The way you worked your magic on Thor, you can probably work around my boobs and not have me come out looking like a stripper or a sixty year old woman.”

Keep choked on their water. “Yes.” they said a little weakly. “We – my partner and I - work with clients on such fitting all the time. We can emphasize or deemphasize, however you like.”

“Excellent.” Tony said. “Check over Thor’s suit, then we can schedule some unholy fitting where you get measurements from everyone and they can pick fabrics and stuff?”

Keep drank more water, shut their eyes. “I didn’t know how this would go, so the rest of the day is blank for me. I keep all the equipment I need in my car, downstairs.”

“Excellent.” Tony stood. “I’ll round up the rest, you can work on Thor here, then you guys” he pointed at Thor and Darcy “can take Keep down to their car and then up to the common room, right? I’ll gather up the gang and send them up.” He turned to Keep, who looked a lot staggered. “Barton – Hawkeye – is out of town this week, we’ll give your offices a call when he’s back, you can come do him too, that work? His boyfriend will have opinions on cut and fabric and who knows.”

“That will be fine. Each intake appointment will take about two hours, so I’ll start with Miss Lewis, and send for the next when we’re finished.” Keep said, putting aside their water. They rose, and as Tony left the floor, he heard, “Now, Prince Thor, can you lift your arms to the sides, gently, please?”

Darcy gave Tony a thumb’s up. “This is fucking awesome.”

-A-

He went and told Sam and Leo to expect fitting appointments that day, and to maybe shower in the case of Sam who was in the gym.
Then, since he was already wandering around talking to people anyway, “JARVIS, where is Steve?”

Cap. CAP, dammit. That was becoming a losing battle. Maybe he should give up. They were living
together now, keeping his distance was becoming damned near impossible. Not to mention all the
reasons he hated the guy were turning out to be more shit his old man was wrong about. Thanks for
everything, Dad.

He hoped Steve wasn’t in the Hulk Tank with Barnes.

“Captain Rogers is in Sergeant Wilson’s apartment.” There was a pause. “He says you’re welcome
to come by if you like.”

So he did. He knocked at Wilson’s door and it slid open. No one was there to greet him on the other
side. “In here, Tony.” Steve called from the living room.

Down the hall, and there he was, knee deep in pages of newsprint, a brush in one hand, palette in the
other, in front of an easel. The air was thick with the scent of linseed oil, and Steve was grinning like
a madman. “Hi.” Tony tried.

“Hey, Tony.” Steve said easily, swirling paint onto… a giant pad of newsprint. “What do you
need?”

A pile of tranquilizers and the ability to drink booze again. An extra six hours in the day would be
good too. “A favor.”

“Sure.” Steve said absently. He pulled the page of newsprint off the easel and dropped it, what?
carelessly on the floor.

Tony edged closer and picked one up. It was full of shapes, swirls, hatching, and different kinds of
brush strokes. “Painting exercises?” They reminded him of the stuff he’d had to do way back in the
day in drafting classes.

“Yeah. It’s been seventy-odd years. I was never that good at painting anyway, was color-blind. Did
grey scale studies, that was it.” Steve painted some more, body language loose and easy. Tony was
pretty sure it was the first time he’d ever mentioned being on ice without tensing up at least a little.

He hoped he wasn’t going to ruin that. “I, uh. Pepper and I have to do a thing at the Guggenheim
tomorrow night. We, mostly me, we wanted you to come with us.”

Steve’s eyes shifted from the painting to Tony’s face and got extremely sharp. “Expecting trouble?”

Damn he wished that wasn’t so attractive. “Not really, but right now, yeah?”

Steve nodded. “Sure, I’ll come, when do you need me?”

Tony breathed a little easier. Yes, Pepper was indestructible now, but he didn’t care. Justin goddamn
Hammer had tried to have her kidnapped, for fuck’s sake. “We’ll leave at seven, go to dinner first?
Wear your tux. Still hate Thai food?”

“I don’t HATE Thai food, there are just lots of things I prefer. It makes me feel like my eyeballs are
melting.”

Huh. He’d have to mention that to Bruce, there was some kind of painkiller in hot sauce or
something. “Wuss.” he had to say.

“Oh yes, that’s what I am.” Steve agreed sarcastically, and went back to painting.
Tony… didn’t want to leave. Not when Steve was like this, so mellow and easygoing. He leaned on the back of Sam’s couch. “I found the elevator footage.”

Steve frowned at him a minute before his brain caught up. “Oh. Yeah?”

“It was badass. But not as badass as the bridge at the Triskelion.”

Steve shook his head and chuckled. “By time I got to the bridge, I was pretty irritated.”

“It showed. I think Fury’s using it as a training exercise now.” Took down a Quinjet with his shield and nothing else. Every time Tony thought he’d figured out what he was dealing with, Steve went off and did something else outrageous and unexpected.

Laughing, Steve tore off another sheet of newsprint, handed it to Tony, and turned back to his paint again.

On the paper was a perfect portrait of Tony, slashed out in dark blue paint with a half-inch brush. Six, no eight brush strokes and it was recognizably Tony Stark grinning out of the paper, looking like he was up to something. “Thanks.”

“Portraiture was always my thing. Want to get back to it.” He glanced over his shoulder at a couple canvases leaning against the wall. “Still need to get my, mojito?”

“Mojo.” Tony corrected. He was never sure if Steve did that shit on purpose to fuck with him or if he really wasn’t up on all the slang. There WAS an awful lot of slang. On the other hand his brain DID work better than average due to the serum and being really smart to begin with.

“Right, need my mojo back.”

“I’ll leave you to it.”

Steve grunted and went back to painting.

That should not be appealing.

He went to show Pepper the portrait and see if it was as good as he thought it was.

-A-

Steve’s day had been, well, outstanding. Run and breakfast with Sam, the rest of the day painting. Buck had checked in a couple times by wall screen, and Sam made him a sandwich at one point. Tony had stopped by, asked for a favor, and been more friendly than usual, which was nice.

He dragged himself away finally, went upstairs, and joined his team of schnooks for dinner. That was also relaxing. It was so nice, eating meals with the same people, night after night. Like a family after a day at work. He’d never truly lived alone his entire life; those cheap apartment buildings of his youth had communal bathrooms and people hanging out in the hallways and on the stoop, after all. Then the Army, which was the opposite of alone. It was only in the last few years he’d had real space to himself, and even now it felt kind of strange. So communal meals and people wandering through were really comforting.

“After dinner,” Tony announced in his troublemaking voice, “we have some educational video of Captain America, and then we’d like to ask the non-science geeks among you for ideas with a problem on the Winter Arm.”
Steve glanced up at Bucky on the wall screen at that. Buck shrugged and said “worth a try.” so he
guessed that was all right. Wait, educational video?

“Tony, you are not going to show that elevator scene?” he demanded.

“I absolutely am, with subtitles for what you said. I had JARVIS run a lip-reading program, and holy
shit, you’re as bad as me for smartass remarks. I don’t ever want to hear about it again. I’m so
proud.”

On the screen, Bucky sighed and face-palmed. “Stevie, what did you do now?”

“Nothing!” Steve protested. “Well.” and this was how SO many conversations had gone between
them, back before the war. He couldn’t help grinning a little. “I beat up some bullies, okay?”

“No.” Tony corrected. “You wound up on an elevator with ten special ops guys, and asked ‘Before
we get started, does anyone want to get off?’ and THEN when they went berserk you beat the shit
out of them. Then staged an escape from the most secure building in the world, resulting in millions
in property damage. It was AWESOME. I put it all together from security footage. I’m so proud, that
was Iron Man worthy levels of ‘fuck all you people’.”

“So that hasn’t changed.” Bucky said sarcastically.

“It’s AMAZING. Mister ‘we need a plan of attack’ goes full frontal assault.” Tony said to Bucky. It
was the first time Steve remembered Tony talking to him directly, and Tony didn’t seem to notice.
He glanced at Pepper; she had. “the whole escape from the Triskelion is like an action movie.”

“They started it.” Steve said, going back to his food and ignoring the roar of laughter all around him.

-A-

After dinner, Tony took over. He was enjoying himself, and Steve had a twisted half-grin on his face
that none of them saw enough, so she let it go. The screen opened on an aerial view of an elevator:
security cam. Steve was standing, alone, looking sad. She wanted to hug him and ruffle his hair.
Several men got on. Polite words were exchanged, but by Steve’s body language, he was surprised
by them. More stops, more very large men, all jostling around, trying to be casual as they got Steve
in the middle of the group. Steve was watching them, and she could see the instant he realized
something was up. Then he spoke.

“Before we get started, does anyone want to get off?” Tony said, his voice following Steve’s mouth
forming the words.

One of the men hit the emergency stop, and chaos erupted.

“Dude.” Sam said with deepest respect.

“I TOLD you they started it.” Steve replied, rolling his eyes and taking a drink of beer.

Within moments, everyone who’d jumped Steve was laying on the floor, and Steve kicked the shield
up onto his arm, reminding Pepper of a boy with a skateboard from her younger years. A smattering
of applause broke out.

“Nooo.” Tony interrupted, waving his hands. “Wait for it.”

On screen, Steve opened the doors, then spun and CUT THE ELEVATOR CABLES. Pepper
squeaked and grabbed Steve’s hand. Dear God, she had known things were horrible with the
helicarriers, but not before that.

Then he JUMPED OUT THE WINDOW. Then it got worse.

When it was all over, there was applause and whistling and Pepper stared at the screen in horror. Steve’s hand covered hers where it was wrapped around him, and he said easily, “It’s okay, Pepper.”

“It’s really not.” she said faintly. Every damned one of them pulled this stuff, and laughed about it later, and she cared about every idiotic one of them. She suddenly realized she was close to crushing Steve’s wrist and let go. “I’m so sorry.”

“It’s all right.” Steve told her again, and gave her a soft hug with one arm.

“Hill?” Barnes asked.

“Yeah?”

“Next time Steve here is in the Hulk Tank, can I have one hit before you start worrying and gas me?”

Hill glanced from Barnes’ face, to the screen where a smoking Quinnjet was frozen, then at Steve. “Right hand only. One hit, no broken bones. On either of you.”

“Deal.” Barnes said with a nod.

“Hey.” Steve said with no heat.

“Forget it, Rogers, guy has a point. And I have brothers.” Hill replied.

“Was Rumlow among the wreckage in the Triskelion?” Sam asked thoughtfully, staring at the screen.

“Don’t know.” Steve said. “Literally, don’t know. There were some… unidentified. And with the explosions, uh. There may not be remains for some.”

“Rumlow?” Pepper asked, dreading the answer.

Steve nodded at the screen, “Leader of Alpha strike, last guy standing in the elevator fight there. Hydra. Asshole.”

“One of the Winter Soldier’s handlers.” Barnes provided.

“Had not known that.” Steve said, looking like he wanted a time machine to go kill the guy.

“If he’s still around, he’d have one hell of a grudge.” Sam said idly.

“That’s okay, I have one of my own.” Steve told him.

“So do I.” Barnes added.

Oh good, more to worry about.

“Right. Now that we’ve dispensed with the entertainment portion of the evening,” Tony interrupted.

She was living with people who found this entertaining. She took a covert glance around the room; yes, the science staff looked a little shocked and worried, good to have company, but all the
Avengers were highly amused and still grinning.

Pepper got up to make herself a martini.

“With Barnes’ permission,” Tony continued, and that was interesting, “we’re going to share the information we have on the Winter Arm, explain the problem we’re having with removal, and see if any of you guys have any ideas.”

“Oh.” Sam said hesitantly. “Y’all realize I’m a counselor, right?”

“With paramedic training.” Tony replied smoothly. “And the guy next to you is an artist who is one of the world’s leading tactical geniuses, and behind you is a brilliant scientist who turns into a giant green rage monster, and does yoga and knitting for fun. Want me to keep going? I think Darcy and Pepper are the only ones here who are actually qualified to do the jobs they’re doing. Well, Pepper. Darcy’s doing about sixty jobs, she can’t be formally qualified for all of them.”

Darcy flipped him off easily in a practiced gesture.

Someone started giggling. Pepper was fairly sure it was Skye, who as far as Pepper knew didn’t even have a GED and was more useful with computers than the entire IT department. Sam made a go-ahead gesture.

Tony sat down, and Betty took over. She laid out the problems concisely; the big issue was bleeding to death, which yes. Problem. Pepper went and sat back down between Steve and Tony, with a shaker of Martinis and a glass.

“Uh.” Steve said carefully, looking first to Bucky, who made a ‘who knows?’ face, and then around the room. “Why not freeze the spot, until you can get in there with glue or stitches or whatever?”

“We can’t put him into cryo-” Betty began to patiently re-explain.

“I understand.” Steve said hastily. “Can’t you freeze the spot where the blood vessels are? Just that spot? Wouldn’t that work? At least long enough?”

“That would cause-” Betty stopped and turned to Barnes quickly, staring at him. “Frostbite. It wouldn’t work on a baseline human. The surrounding tissue damage would be substantial.”

“But I’m not human.” Bucky pointed out, neutrally.

“But you’re not BASELINE human.” Betty echoed.

FitzSimmons made a shocked noise, Jemma grabbed a tablet out of Skye’s hands, and began flipping through something. “I think we can work it around the nerve circuits.” Jemma announced.

“I told you to ignore-” Bucky began, and snapped his mouth shut when Jemma pointed at him with a scowl and a snarl. Interesting. Pepper hadn’t thought Jemma had that in her; she just shut down James Barnes. Impressive.

“I think we can do it.” Fitz said. “We’ll need a directional gadget of some kind to do the freezing-”

“I think we can figure out something between the two of us.” Tony said easily.

“Nerve blocks, probably mega doses of ketamine. No, not ketamine, it causes nightmares… Valium? A cocktail, maybe.” Simmons muttered, walking to the front of the room for a closer look at the schematic.
And they were off in a flurry of ideas and plans. Foremost was a surgical suite, which Tony happened to have on a medical floor he’d never mentioned to anyone, including Pepper. You know, in case of a sudden need for surgery. As one does. She’d see about staffing it next week; it could function as a clinic for the employees in the building, day to day, and be a little more cost-effective that way.

Pepper leaned back into the couch and breathed more easily, and smiled when Steve refilled her drink.

Chapter End Notes

Drop me a note if I messed up the gender-neutral character. I tried this revolutionary thing where I wrote them like a regular old person and threw in the proper pronouns.
Kerpow.

Chapter Summary

No one looked violent; some envious, some charmed, some actually spiteful, but nothing strange. The back of his neck was crawling; something was going on. He couldn’t figure what, but he was glad to be there. He watched the crowd some more.

Blessing Pepper and Natasha in her mind, Darcy dressed carefully for her appointment with Thor at SHIELD. Not only did she have properly fitting clothes and shoes and undergarments now, but the other two women had shared their wisdom, which was invaluable. “These aren’t clothes.” Natasha told her, waving an arm at the mind-boggling array of casual-to-formal they’d selected. It filled half of the walk-in closet in her suite.

“They aren’t?” Darcy asked, sure she was missing something.

“No. They are COSTUMES.”

And hell yeah, Darcy could work the hell out of some costumes, she could indeed. She put on a navy chalk-stripe suit, fitted perfectly, the skirt two vital inches too short, over a dramatically V-necked dark blue silk blouse. The blouse distracted everyone with the girls as well as showing off her new badge of office. Silk stockings, hair up but sexy up, black Ferragamo stilettos. She considered herself in the mirror; she looked like a bimbo who was trying to be taken seriously. Then she went to find Pepper, since Natasha wasn’t around at the moment for her advice.

Pepper was in her own perfect and much less bimbolike suit, consulting with her admin when Darcy walked into her office. Pepper gave her a once over and announced, “Everyone will see the legs and boobs and underestimate you drastically. Perfect for SHIELD. You need earrings.”

“That’s what I thought, but nothing I have measures up to the necklace.” Darcy agreed.

“We’ll fix that. JARVIS, have Tony go get my red ruby JAR earrings, the floral ones. Darcy will meet him on the lab floor for them.”

“Oh my god, I can’t wear those. They’re art. What if I lose one?” Or BOTH?

“They need to be over the top to go with the necklace. Some wimpy old diamond studs aren’t gonna cut it.” Pepper said. “Needs to be overwhelming. Tits, ass, and jewelry. JARVIS, have him get the poppy lapel clip, too.”

“Oh god.” Darcy said weakly.

Pepper grinned, that look she got when making Tony suffer for his own good. “Don’t worry about the loans, the necklace could be worth more than the Tower. What’s some other jewelry on top of it?”

Darcy staggered out and went to go see Tony.
“Not bad.” Tony allowed. He handed over the earrings, and Darcy slid them into place. “Nice. The color is really flattering on you. Not the point of all this, but they really do look good. You should stick with strong jewel tones.” Darcy blinked at him. He held up a floral clip. “Normally I’d say lapel, but given the V neck on your blouse… Up to you, but if you’re going for distraction and owning the femininity, I say put it at the V of your collar. Everyone will focus on the cleavage and miss the intelligence in your eyes.” He grinned. “Boobs make certain types of men incredibly stupid. Work it. They deserve to be made fools of, right?”

That… was the oddest and yet nicest compliment Darcy had ever been given. Especially from Tony Stark who had high standards on who he considered intelligent. Plus he knew more about this kind of dressing than she did. Probably more about bimbos, too. Darcy took the flower and clipped it into the point of the V between her breasts. She looked down. Pretty intimidating, if she did say so herself.

“Men who are threatened by women are not gonna know whether to scream and run, or offer to have your babies.” Tony told her. “Good choice. Not businesslike, but in my opinion? Perfect for what you’re doing today. Be ready for people who aren’t intimidated by women, but attracted to them, to offer you anything you want.”

Her goal was for Fury to dismiss her. The longer she could fly under SHIELD’s radar, the better. “Thanks.”

“Give ’em hell, kid. Let me know if you need backup.” Tony told her, and they bumped fists.

Darcy walked out, thinking of Tony, and his relationship with Leo. She wondered if anyone had ever told him he was a good mentor.

She’d wait to mention it until he was drinking coffee, to see if she could get him to snarf it out his nose.

-A-

Thor tried to open the car door for her. “Stop this, we discussed it.” she told him.

“But-”

“You are goddamn Prince Odinson and I am your servant-”

“Vinur”

“-not how it’s seen on Midgard, Sparky, and as such, I am here to SERVE so be the goddamn prince.” She subtly hip-checked him away from the front door of SHIELD HQ (it only worked because he allowed it), and opened the door for him.

“But-”

Ugh, men. “You asked me to do this, so let me fucking do this, goddamn it. I am the Midgard expert, of the two of us.” she snarled between her teeth, then got in front of him and strode to the front desk. Thor was in full armor minus the winged helmet, carrying Mjolnir. State visit. Everyone in the lobby was at attention and shifty-eyed by the time they were two steps in the door. “Prince Odinson for Nick Fury.” she announced as haughtily as possible.

“One moment, Miss…?” the receptionist sneered back.

“Lady Darcy Lewis, Vinur to Prince Odinson, protector of the Nine Realms.” Thor said regally,
bringing an abrupt end to any and all snarking.

That… sounded pretty impressive. Darcy vowed she would not hyperventilate. Or laugh. Natasha would kick her ass either way.

“One moment.” the receptionist said quickly, and grabbed for her phone.

Shortly the elevator doors opened and a competent-looking blond woman came out. “Ms Lewis? Prince Odinson? I’m Agent Carter. If you could come with me.”

Before he’d left, Phil had given Darcy a list of SHIELD agents to be trusted. Sharon Carter was at the top of the list. So she tried an easier smile than she might have and followed, Thor striding along behind like the prince of everything. The cape was a nice touch. In the elevator, away from prying eyes (except for security cams), Carter smiled a little bit and held out a hand. “Ms Lewis, it’s nice to meet you.” They shook. She gave Thor a more respectful nod. “Prince Odinson.”

Thor gave his regal head nod. “Agent Carter.” The way he could turn that on and off gave Darcy a headache; this was the same guy who’d been in flannel pajamas, stealing her Toaster Strudel, three hours ago.

Agent Carter served drinks and made nice for the few minutes it took for Fury to show up, then excused herself quickly.

“What’s this about?” Fury asked, playing dumb.

In private, Thor had spoken to Darcy at length about Fury, about what he thought of the guy, his gut instinct, and views on honor and public service. To summarize, Thor was only putting up with Fury because the rest of the team seemed to think he was needed. If it were up to Thor, he’d go straight over Fury’s, and everyone else’s, heads to the UN and drop all this straight in their laps. Asgardians considered stealth kind of dishonorable to begin with, and that was before all the lies started to cover it up. THEN, Fury had gone and asked Thor – vaguely worded, of course – if he was willing to help torture Loki to make him talk. She honestly didn’t know if Fury thought at all. She leaned toward not. In keeping with how they’d decided to play this, Darcy kicked back and drank her coffee and let Thor handle it.

She hadn’t been impressed with SHIELD much at all herself, and that was before she found out about Phil, and Clint (they were SO CUTE together), about Fury’s lies to his supposed best friend and his loved ones, and no. Thor could crush him like a bug and she was only going to complain if the mess ruined her nice new clothes.

“Fury.” Oh damn, no title at all. Thor was at his subtly insulting best. It was fun, watching the people who looked at him and the armor and assumed he was a meathead who had never even heard of subtle. When they finally realized he was smarter than they were, oh, that was always damned entertaining. She was going to enjoy this. Fury hadn’t been kicked around by the Avengers nearly enough. “I am here about the scepter.”

“Yeah, I spoke to Rogers and Stark-”

“No. I, Prince Thor Odinson the Strong of Asgard, Protector of the Nine Realms, am here as spokesman for my father, King Odin the Wise, Allfather, Son of Borr, Shield Shaker, Ruler of Gods. We have patiently given you time after your upset, to clean house and be sure of your facts.” Thor seemed to expand, which was impressive. “Where is the scepter?”

Fury looked at Darcy, of all people. Seriously? She gave him the “I’m not your mother” look back.
What the fuck, dude, she was there for THOR, she wasn’t rescuing his dumb ass. She’d as soon drop him on it.

“We’re in the process of inventories-”

“What. Do you know.” Thor repeated, out of patience, looming. “If I do not get an answer this day, I will take my questions to your ruling body, the United Nations. I am inclined to do so already. They seem an honorable council, and these lies and misdirections disgust me greatly.”

Fury seemed to really stop and think for once, taking in Thor in full armor and might and majesty. “About eighteen months ago, the scepter was sent from the Triskelion to a research facility in London. Beyond that, we don’t know, yet. It never arrived in London that we’ve been able to find. I have one of my best men on it.”

“At whose order was the scepter sent away?” Thor asked. Oh yeah, he knew how bureaucracy worked.


“...yes.”

“You will send all the data you have on this to my Vinur, will you not?” Thor asked in that not-a-question way the powerful had.

“All right.” Fury agreed, looking like he was trying to eat a lemon. Without a word Darcy pulled a (beautiful, chosen by Pepper and Natasha) business card case out of a pocket, opened it, and laid a (beautiful, chosen by Pepper and Natasha) “Vinur to Prince Odinson” card on the table. The other side of the case held ‘Darcy Lewis, director of specialty labs, Stark Industries’ cards. The combination always made her grin. She fought it back.

“Do not disappoint me, Fury.” Thor announced like a demand, gathered up Darcy, and swept from the building.

Darcy kept her poker face on until they were in the limo and Happy was driving them home. Then she flopped back in the seat and laughed. “Oh my god, my life is AWESOME.”

Thor smiled. “Is it then, little one?”

“We just intimidated the shit out of the head of a multinational intelligence agency.”

“So we did.”

Darcy hit the intercom. “Happy? You need to be anywhere soon?”

“No, Miss Lewis.”

“Quit calling me that. Can you take us to Mario’s? Would they let us in for lunch, dressed like this?”

Happy glanced into the rear-view mirror, looking at Thor in his armor and Darcy in a couple hundred thousand in jewelry with daywear. “Hell, he’d get a kick out of it.”

“I shall make another toast!” Thor decided. “The women of Midgard are glorious; Lady Sif should visit, she would enjoy the company.”
It was another fantastic day, except for getting punched in the face by Bucky. Steve gave up on painting in late afternoon and went to drag on his tuxedo. Sam trailed along behind him from his living room into Steve’s apartment, chatting as he did.

“Out with Darcy?”

Steve squinted at Sam in the mirror for a moment, trying to make his hair look modern.

“No, why?”

“No reason, just that she’s usually who you go out with these days, and she looked amazing this morning.”

She really had. He’d been on the lab floor dropping off food for Tony when she’d come in from her lunch with Thor and… wow. He’d known she was beautiful, of course, he had eyes, but good grief. Her legs went on for days. “I’m going out with Pepper and Tony.”

“You’re what, now?” Sam asked, slouched in the easy chair in Steve’s room. Military men had no modesty.

“Some dinner and gallery thing.”

Sam pondered that, clearly thinking very hard. Steve ignored him to fiddle with the damned cuff links. They were little replicas of his shield that Tony gave him because he thought they were hilarious, but were really fiddly to get put in right.

“Is it a date?” Sam asked.

Steve choked on air. “What?”

“If this a date, tonight?”

He turned and stared at Sam, mind racing. How on earth would Sam get such an idea? Had someone said something? Had Sam read HIS mind? “What are you talking about?” he tried to say as if he wasn’t worried at all.

“Dude. You’re putting on a tuxedo without complaining, and going out to dinner and an art gallery. That says date.”

“There are two of them, and they’re together.”

“And? It’s a brave new world.”

That… huh, there was food for thought. In general. Not about Pepper and Tony, of course, but. Huh. “People do that?”

“It’s called polyamory. It’s not common, but it’s not unheard of, either.”

“I mean as a… thing, not a one time deal for fun.” Steve clarified.

“Yeah, that’s what I mean. Takes a lot of honesty and work, but people build relationships in groups.”

That was going to take a couple days’ thought. At least. Hell, he didn’t even understand the TERMS
for things, let alone actual relationship concepts. Still, hadn’t there been a few arrangements, back in
the day, that no one had really talked about? Mr and Mrs O’Malley the next street over, and Miss
Colfax who lived with them. Everyone called her the housekeeper, but they lived in an apartment,
and she never seemed like a servant. Still. This was going to take some thought.

“Tony asked me, after the kidnapping attempt on Pepper.” He explained.

“So a security thing.” Sam said.

“That’s how I understood it.”

“...what if it WAS a date?”

Hell, he was not having his head examined right now. Especially not about this. “Nice try, Sam, I
don’t have time for an appointment at the moment.”

“Think about it.”

He didn’t see how he was going to think of anything else, now. While he was out to dinner with
them. Damn it.

-A-

Dinner was lovely, but Pepper had expected nothing less. They’d gone out to a place with fairly
casual food, but expensive enough to ensure good service and security. Steve’s manners were
exquisite, Pepper assumed thanks to his mother and Natasha. Tony was in date mode, so he was
using the manners his own mother taught him, and wasn’t this pleasant? She’d always known the
three of them together would be wonderful. Tony had turned some kind of corner in recent days and
seemed much less prickly toward Steve.

Steve, bless him, rolled with it like he always did with everything. Having watched Steve and Barnes
together, she also thought she understood much better how Steve could be so easygoing most of the
time. So when Tony started teasing Steve, she didn’t step in like she normally did, she waited to see
what happened.

“How’s your face?” Tony said, that certain tone he used when poking at people to see what would
happen.

“Oh, that was nothin’.” Steve said, slipping into Brooklynese. He did that when he was feeling
comfortable with the people around him, and Pepper found it adorable. “You shoulda seen the last
brawl. Today? He did worse than that when we were kids, before the serum.”

“He beat up a scrawny, chronically ill little guy?” Tony said, fake-scandalized.

Steve rolled his eyes, taking a moment to finish what he was eating. “I’m sure he did it with love.” he
added.

“What about the last brawl?” Pepper asked, since Steve had been grinning when he mentioned it.
Obviously he hadn’t been thinking of that horror on the helicarrier that put him in the hospital. Tony
had come home from checking on Steve that time, speechless. And a week later she’d been afraid to
kiss his face for fear of hurting him.

Supporting her thoughts, Steve laughed. “It was after Azzano, when I went and got him, in Italy?
Got all the POWs back to base, I spent about two days explaining myself to the brass, finally got a
shower and enough grub. I leave the mess tent, and there’s Buck, standing there looking angry, and
he wants to know how in hell I’d gotten there, since I’d been a scrawny 4F he’d left in Brooklyn, last
he knew.”

“And that made him fight you?” Pepper asked, not understanding men in the least, because Tony
was laughing like he understood.

“I got to the part about volunteering to climb into an experimental box to be pumped full of
experimental drugs and he grabbed me. We knocked over a couple tents, smashed up a Jeep, it took
all the Howlies and a couple more guys to pull us apart, and Buck broke his hand. On my face.”

Tony cackled. Heads turned.

“After Buck got his hand set, we had to put the tents back up, the two of us, on Phillips’ orders.
Then we had to sit in one until Phillips was done being angry. Took a couple days. Peg also gave us
a real talking to; I’d have preferred Phillips keep yelling. Howlies had to sneak us in food.”

Tony was still laughing when they left the restaurant.

-A-

As the evening went by, Tony felt more and more like an idiot, for all the effort he’d put in over the
last couple years to keep Steve at a distance. It was becoming very clear: Steve Rogers wasn’t
Captain America. Well, he was in the literal sense, of course. The dude who put on the heroic
costume and stuck out his heroic chin and said heroic stuff was still as annoying as fuck. It took him
way, way too long to put together Steve Rogers and Captain America as a variant on his own
private and public personae. After all, if he was Tony Fucking Stark at home, Pepper would have
kicked his own teeth in by now. More than once. Here Steve was doing about the same thing (maybe
less obnoxiously, MAYBE, that truth and justice speechifying shit was still pretty annoying) and
how long had it taken him to put it together?

Bah. He was still blaming every damn bit of this on his father and he didn’t care how juvenile that
sounded.

ANYway. Dinner’s highlight had definitely been Steve talking about what happened when his best
friend found out about Project Rebirth. As usual, Tony hated agreeing with Barnes about anything,
but really. Volunteering for a program run by mad scientists? Including his old man? Tony could
only wonder if Barnes shouted first or simply punched him for starts.

Steve handled the red carpet and greetings like a pro, which he was. Tony should develop some
respect for Steve’s old stories about the “Spangle Circuit.” Once they were inside, they both stood
back to let Pepper schmooze, and he leaned in and grumbled “You said ‘some thing at the
Guggenheim’, you did not fully explain to me what this was.” in Tony’s ear.

Because explaining it was embarrassing and kinda sounded like bragging. “It’s a thing. At the
Guggenheim.”

“It is an exhibition of the Stark Collection, to celebrate a generous endowment by the Maria Stark
Foundation to fund art classes for low-income kids.”

“It was Pepper’s idea.” Tony said, trying not to sound defensive. It HAD been Pepper’s idea, after
Steve mentioned ages ago he wished he’d been able to finish art school. All right, Tony had to sign a
shitload of papers and talk to a couple museums and a dozen people at the Foundation, but. It was
Pepper’s idea, kind of a thank-you for all his help after the Extremis thing. Steve gave him a glare
like he saw through the entire ploy and they would be speaking later. Tony turned away to schmooze
some, himself, before they started a fight and Pepper killed them both. No matter how much she loved Tony or was grateful to Steve, she wouldn’t hesitate to murder both of them if they fucked up her evening. Or the SI share prices. Or a number of other things. Tony had a list.

“Come show me around, asshole.” Steve demanded after Tony had seen off a couple stock holders.

A month ago Tony would have taken vast exception to that, but in the last month he’d seen how Steve interacted with his best friend, and that gave everything a different slant. “Oh, fine, a quick walk-through, but then drinks and dancing.”

Steve actually GROWLED, and again instead of rising to the bait, Tony struggled not to laugh.

Tony tried to make it a fast walk-through, but Steve kept stopping him because, unfortunately, Steve knew art enough to be impressed.

“You own a Picasso.” Steve said faintly, staring at the canvas in front of them.

It was one of the cubist portraits with the wonky perspective, and he remembered buying it in a boozed-up haze, bidding on it because it looked like Pepper when she was giving him hell; the model had light-colored hair and a stern look on her face, all cubism aside. “Uh.” Actually he owned more than one. There were two in Pepper’s office; she loved Picasso. Tony moved them along.

People kept stopping to talk, and tell Tony how wonderful he was, and he’d try to deflect, and STEVE WOULD AGREE WITH THEM and he wanted to shuffle like a teenager. This had been a terrible idea. Finally, in desperation, he told Steve, “You know, there’s a deKooning down by the entrance...”

That finally got him moving, thankfully, and after, Tony chivvied him into the event room where there were tables and food and dancing. He got waylaid by a shareholder and before he knew it, Steve was back and handing him a drink. He made introductions and Steve very subtly got rid of them, which was impressive.

Tony took a cautious sip of his drink and it was ginger ale with a lime wedge. Huh. “Uh. Thanks.”

“You know,” Steve said very casually, looking at the crowd, “I have an enhanced sense of smell. Serum thing.”

Okay? “Yeah?”

Steve nodded. “Dernier had me trained well enough that I could sometimes tell different years of wines, by the scent alone.” He nodded toward Tony’s drink and lowered his voice. “If you ever want to talk about that, you can.” He turned back to the room. “Who ARE all these people?”

It took Tony a minute to catch up; Steve had known for how long that he didn’t drink? And probably mentioned it now because he knew Tony couldn’t make a scene. That devious little shit. “Oh, you know. Society. Rich people.”

“You’re soaking them, right?”

Tony had to laugh out loud. “Absolutely.”

They clinked glasses, and Tony heard some camera phones go off. Good. Phil and Darcy would be pleased by anything that made them look like they were getting along. Pepper swept up. She’d begun buying evening clothes in the dark blue shade of the dress she’d had on at that first gala after Afghanistan, when he’d finally noticed her. Tonight it was that shade, filmy layers upon layers.
gathered at one shoulder, drifting around her. She wore diamonds he’d given her, and her hair was
down and curly, she had on sexy heels, and she was the most beautiful thing he’d ever seen. She
kissed him and smiled and life was pretty damn good.

“We should dance,” he decided. These events always reminded him of that first night, that click of
recognition when she’d turned and he’d realized the beautiful woman on the dance floor was
PEPPER. They’d danced and there she was, this stunning woman, dishing out shit like she always
did with him. He realized she was a foundation in his life, and he was lucky beyond description to
have found her at all, and to have kept her. It had still taken him a while after to get his shit together,
but that was it for him, that night. He’d never looked at another woman. He’d always thought
monogamy would be difficult, but after he fell for Pepper, it was effortless. He simply didn’t want
anyone else.

Pepper let herself be led out onto the floor, and they moved together perfectly, like they always had,
even when she’d only been his PA and they’d been at constant war with each other. “How’s Steve?”
she asked.

“I might have neglected to explain exactly what tonight was.”

“Oh, Tony.”

“He called me an asshole.”

She threw back her head and laughed. More phones clicked.

-A-

He leaned against the bar and tried to memorize how Pepper and Tony looked on the dance floor. He
wanted to paint them, try to capture the motion of the two of them. Judging from the number of
phones he could see, he could get on social media later with JARVIS’ help and get all the photos he
wanted, but… he pulled out his own phone and took a couple reference shots and a quick video. He
knew exactly how he wanted to frame it, he needed to get moving on his skills so this was still fresh
in his mind because it was a painting. Probably watercolor; it needed to be airy and light and show
the movement of them together. He slipped the phone back into his pocket and went back to
skimming the crowd. No one looked violent; some envious, some charmed, some actually spiteful,
but nothing strange. The back of his neck was crawling; something was going on. He couldn’t figure
what, but he was glad to be there. He watched the crowd some more.

The song finished and everyone applauded the band politely, and Tony and Pepper came over,
holding hands and smiling broadly and he envied them so much. Each of them had the other’s back,
always, and it was the most solid relationship he’d ever seen, among two of the most independent
people he’d ever met. He didn’t know how they made it work, but they were a solid unit. You could
tell, just looking at them. Pepper smiled at him brightly and said “Come dance, Steve.”

Oops. “Oh, well, I don’t know…” He still wasn’t great at dancing. Natasha had beat him into shape,
mostly against his will, but according to her he thought too much and that’s where it all went to hell.

“Steve, I know back in the day you only danced with women you had designs on, but these days, it’s
a thing friends do.” Tony said with an elbow to his ribs.

Well that made it impossible to say no, now. He stuck out an elbow, and Pepper smiled again, that
beautiful smile that made her eyes sparkle, and he escorted her out to the floor as another song
started. He prayed it wasn’t anything fancy. “I’m still terrible at dancing. I can two-step and waltz,
that’s it.”
Pepper moved into his arms and he got a whiff of her perfume. Roses and something citrus. Unusual and perfectly her. “It’s all right, Steve.”

“I hope you say that after the third time I step on your toes.”

“I can take it.” She assured him with a little smile.

They danced, and it was so NICE, to not have to make inane small talk. Or be gushed at with hero worship. “The collection is amazing.”

“Tony loves art a lot more than he’s willing to admit.”

“And you?”

“Oh, I studied art in college. I’ll admit it.”

He laughed.

“Your painting of Tony the other day was amazing.”

Steve had to actually think about that. Painting…? “Oh, you mean the little sketch I did.” He’d used paint, but it was a cartoon more than anything.

“A few lines and it was Tony. That takes a good bit of skill.”

Steve fought the urge to squirm. “The goatee makes it easy to draw him. It’s pretty distinctive.”

She laughed until heads turned. He thought about dancing with friends as he walked Pepper back to Tony. Tony’d been loosening up lately, and Steve had been looking for a subtle way to work on supporting marginalized groups. And of course Tony LOVED making a scene.

“Not bad, grandpa.” Tony told him with a grin.

“Well then.” Steve answered, and put his elbow out.

Tony’s jaw dropped a bit, and he said, inelegantly, “what?”

That was satisfying; surprising Tony took some work. “Dancing with friends, right? So?” He held out his elbow again, wiggled it. “Cut a rug?”

Pepper was giggling.

Tony, in kind of a trance, put his arm in Steve’s and Steve escorted him out to the floor. A waltz began, and “Oh, shit, a waltz. Tallest man leads. I’ll do my best.”

Still moving automatically, Tony took his hand and began following.

“Sorry if I step on your toes.”

Tony seemed to shake himself all over. “No, that’s fine. I’m used to leading, we can step on each other. Just. What in hell. Do you have any idea what you’re doing?”

“Not at all. I’m terrible at waltzing. Natasha taught me, would threaten to stab me when I stepped on her toes. It didn’t help much with how nervous I get.”

Tony leaned in a little, lowered his voice. “Conservative groups are going to implode. Do you hear
“Yeah, about that, what does ‘trending’ mean?” Steve asked in the best dumb blond voice Natasha had taught him.

Tony half laughed. “You DO know what you’re doing.”

“Clint and Phil.” Steve said under his breath. “And every other not-hetero person in this country.”

“You’re a stand up guy, Steven Rogers.”

There was a sudden shift in the corner of his eye. He caught an angle, a reflection, something, and followed his instincts. He grabbed Tony, putting himself between the movement and Tony, and shouted “GUN. GET DOWN!” before he heard the shots and felt the unmistakable punch of bullets hitting him. Damn it, he hated getting shot. The floor rushed up to meet him and he heard a repulsor blast and Tony using his authoritative Iron Man voice, so he was all right. Good.
There is no "oh my god, holy shit, what the fuck?" in TEAM.

He had one second of confusion when Steve jumped him, before he heard the gunshots, felt Steve’s body jerk with the impacts. One went through Steve and he felt it hit the body armor under his tux and the repulsor was on his hand and he was firing without thinking, letting the shooter fall as he tried to lower Steve the rest of the way to the floor. “CALL EMS. SECURITY.”

Guards rushed in from everywhere at once, and the screaming seemed distant and underwater. He held a shaking finger to Steve’s pulse and it was strong and steady. Hadn’t hit his heart. Steve’s eyes opened, worried and confused, and Tony gripped his shoulder, hard. “We’re safe. Pepper and I are safe. So are you. We’re calling the others now.” Steve nodded and shut his eyes. He tried to sigh and Tony, terrified, could feel blood gurgling in his lungs. It was bubbling at his lips. He’d felt that, himself, once.

Pepper rushed up with several towels, eyes huge in her face, phone in her hand. “Everyone’s on the way, JARVIS is sending Jemma and Betty in an ambulance, I don’t know how. What do I do?”

Steve shifted slightly at the sound of her voice, and she immediately knelt and stroked a hand over his bright blond hair as Tony pressed the towels to his back. “It’s all right, Steve, we have you. We’re all safe.” She told him, and he relaxed again.

“Can you do Wrath of Pepper and handle Security until the gang gets here? After that, go back to the Tower with Steve, make sure he knows we’re both all right whenever he wakes up. I’ll stay, figure out what in hell.”

Across the room, security had cuffed and lifted the shooter, and were supporting him between two large officers. He shouted “HAIL HYDRA!” convulsed, foamed at the mouth some, and collapsed.

Probably dead.

“Motherfucking sonofabitch.”

Pepper rose, and suddenly was in full CEO mode. She was his goddess. “He’s dead?” when she got an affirmative, “put him back down then, leave it for the police. See to the guests, put them all in the atrium, and try to keep them calm.” She turned to another group of security guards milling around. “You, go secure the kitchens and make sure all the catering and waitstaff remain here until further notice. Your priority is KEEPING EVERYONE CALM.”

They nodded, grateful for something to do, and hurried off.

Pepper moved away, calling for museum staff, and Tony turned back to work on getting the goddamn bleeding to stop. The whistling bubbles from Steve’s rib cage were trying to give him flashbacks; he knew very well exactly what that felt like. He took a deep breath, dug in, and got to work.

-A-
She was in their little private common area with Jane and Thor when all hell suddenly broke loose. “Prince Thor, you are needed at the Guggenheim Museum at once.” JARVIS announced. A satellite map of New York flashed onto the wall screen and Thor took a split second to study it before he grabbed Mjolnir from the coffee table. “Falcon is taking off from the main landing area now.”

“Very good, what is the situation?” Thor shoved an ear bud in his ear and his phone in his pocket. The window slid open, hey, what? and he was gone into the night.

“JARVIS?” Jane demanded.

There was a pause. Those pauses always freaked Darcy out because it meant JARVIS was thinking really hard and HOW HARD DID AN ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE HAVE TO THINK TO CREATE A LAG? “Captain Rogers has been shot. The perpetrator seems to be dead; we are sending Doctors Ross and Simmons out now with an ambulance. Agent May is going with them to handle crisis management on site.” Another pause. “Doctor Banner could use your assistance on the hospital floor.”

“We have a hospital floor?” Jane asked, grabbing Darcy, pulling her up, and hugging her. The elevator opened and Hill was on it, glaring impatiently. “MOVE.” They jumped on. “What do we know?” Jane demanded. That was Janey’s method of dealing with anything, really: Demand information.

“Someone yelling ‘hail Hydra’ got off a couple shots.” Hill said, flipping through her phone/communicator screens and texting quickly. “We don’t know if they were shooting at Stark or Steve, but Steve moved fast enough to cover Stark.” She glanced up, face softening when she saw them. “Remember, he’s got the serum. He’s kind of used to getting shot, the big idiot. Stark says his pulse is strong, he should be fine.”

The elevator doors opened, and hey, a hospital floor no one had thought to mention.

Darcy was getting a headache.

“Good, help.” Bruce announced. “Jane, unpack these” he waved at a box of something in sterile packages, “into this,” and then at a cabinet. Jane jumped to work. “Maria, you’re on logistics, getting him from the garage up to here.” Maria nodded. “May is taking care of coordinating with SHIELD and the NYPD?”

“Yes.” Maria said briskly, then turned away to work more on her phone and ear bud.

“Darcy. We need you to keep him calm.”

She looked away from the OR, where all sorts of scary equipment was being laid out. “What?”

Bruce walked over, took her by the shoulders, and shook a bit. “Steve. The serum keeps drugs from working, remember?”

“Oh JESUS.”

“Only god we’ve got is Thor. He’s working on it.” Bruce gave a tiny, weak smile. “We need you to talk to Steve, keep him calm. We think there are still a couple bullets in him.”

Her knees went out but Bruce hung on and shook her again. “DARCY.”

“Give me a Valium.” She demanded.
Bruce blinked. “What?”

“You want me to keep him calm? I NEED TO BE CALM.”

Bruce nodded, walked to what looked like a drug cabinet, poked through. He handed her a little pill. “Ativan. Better for stress when we don’t want you falling asleep.”

She dry swallowed it.

“Here.” Bruce held up an oxygen mask. “Just a quick breath.”

She inhaled, and… “Is this weed?”

“It’s some of that last hybrid we used, mixed with pure oxygen.”

“Lewis.” Hill snapped out. Not angrily, but in a hurry. “Get a move on.”

She jumped into the elevator and they rode down, fast. “Look, I’m a scientist herder, I-”

Hill’s face eased back from her scowl. “We’ve got the rest handled. Cops, medical, security, all that crap. We need you to talk to him, tell him everyone else is all right. Manage him like you manage all of us. We’ve got the rest.”

Okay. Handling people. Right. She could do this.

She hoped. FUCK.

The elevator doors opened onto a loading dock she didn’t know they had as an ambulance screamed up. The doors opened and Betty, Pepper, and Jemma leapt out, began pulling the gurney out. Darcy and Hill stepped forward to help. Back into the elevator. Darcy leaned down and kissed Steve’s cheek. “Hey. We’re at the Tower. Everyone’s okay except you, dumbass. They’re gonna get the bullets out, and then it’s ice cream and Netflix until you feel better.”

At ‘get the bullets out’ Steve did a jerk and shudder and Darcy wondered what all had gone on during World War Two. She turned to Hill. “Get on the horn to James, ask him for advice on dealing with this. He HAS to know more than we do. Then get Thor the hell back here, NOW.” Someone was going to have to hold Steve down, and Pepper might have the strength but it would give her nightmares forever. Thor would be able to see it – rightly – as helping, and tough it out. He’d probably done similar things with the Warriors Three and Sif. They all seemed nuts enough to do this sort of thing.

Hill stared for one second, then nodded briskly started on her phone again. Pepper was white to the lips, and her hands shaking. While the medics got Steve moved over to the operating table, Darcy sat her down, blessed whoever had put in a kitchen, and got some of her hot chocolate. “Breathe. He’ll be fine.”

He’d better be fine or she’d kick his ass.

James popped up on the wall screen. “How bad?”

Pepper took a breath. “Three shots. One went through.”

“Fuck.” James paced. “Let me talk to the surgeon.”

“JARVIS, transfer James to the OR screen.” Pepper ordered, and oh geez, a wall screen in the OR flicked on. A fast conversation started between James, Betty, and Jemma, while Bruce did imaging
scans.

The elevator door opened and Thor stepped out and put Mjolnir on the floor nearby, just in time to catch Darcy as she hugged him. “It will be well, little one.” He looked around, taking in everything. “Take Pepper upstairs, calm her,” he told her in an undertone. “The Captain would not want either of you to see this. We’ll send for you when it’s over, be prepared to bring his familiar to him.”

Familiar? Oh. Sidekick. Yeah, that was a good idea.

“I’m supposed to keep him calm.” Darcy told him automatically, even though she desperately wanted to leave like Thor was telling her.

“That is for me, during this trial. He would not want to hurt you by accident. Take care of Pepper.”

Right. Pepper was staring down into the mug she’d been given, clearly in shock. This, she could handle. She looked back at Thor. “Do not let me down.”

“I will not, my Vinur.” he said with an arm over his chest and a slight bow. He strode into the OR and began discussing with the rest of them.

Darcy turned back to Pepper, realizing for the first time that the older woman was spattered with Steve’s blood and her dress was ruined; the hem was literally soaked, leaving smears of blood on the floor. Shit. She knelt and took the ridiculously high heels off Pepper’s feet in case of fainting, then put an arm around Pepper’s shoulders and helped her stand. “Come on, babe, let’s get you cleaned up. You’ll feel better.”

Pepper shuddered. “I never wanted to be a superhero.” she whispered.

“I don’t blame you a bit.” Darcy said. “I wouldn’t want to be, either.” Just the periphery was pretty rough. The elevator doors closed out the sterile scent and harsh lights, and both of them breathed a little easier. “JARVIS, take us to the penthouse.”

“Of course, Ms Lewis.”

-A-

He was lifted, and tried to struggle until Tony was there, telling him it would be all right. Movement, and sirens. He wondered where they were taking him, and tried not to think about what getting the bullets back out would entail. It was always horrible, and then he’d have nightmares for weeks.

Someone shook him gently and he opened his eyes. “We’re going to try some things to make it hurt less, all right?” Jemma said. That would take a miracle, but it was nice of them to try. He nodded. Something went around his neck and he struggled a little until Thor’s voice was there telling him to stand down. He did. There was more fiddling at his neck and suddenly the pain backed off and he felt like he could breathe. Except breathing made it possible to feel all the blood filling his lung and the broken ribs and he thrashed again.

A mask was clapped over his face and the smell reminded him of the time on the roof, that had been nice, and he breathed, and felt less panicked.

Big hands clapped over his shoulders and he squinted up at Thor’s face. Thor looked very grim. He knew that look.
Then the pain started and it all went black again.

- 

There was a crunching pop deep in his chest and someone screamed.

- 

He was moving again, ceiling lights going by overhead, and he tried to lift his arm. “Hold still, Steve.” Darcy said.

Darcy?

“You’re okay. The bullets are out, everyone is safe. You were only unconscious an hour or so.”

That was good. He hated not knowing how much time passed. There was a flurry of movement around him, beeping started, small jostles and touches as he was elevated slightly and hooked up to heaven knew what equipment. Something moved by his head. What? He tried to turn, see, but he couldn’t. Someone lifted his hand up, laid it over- oh. Sidekick. When he touched her, felt the soft fur, she started purring. Oh, that was nice. Someone put an oxygen mask over his face, the air smelled a little funny, and it all went dark again, thankfully.

-A-

He came in for a landing on the Iron Man platform, staggered into a walk, and headed straight for the doors opening in front of him. “JARVIS, what next?” He left his wing pack on for now, because who the fuck knew.

“Sergeant Wilson.” JARVIS sounded relieved, which was damned unnerving. “They could use a medic on the surgical floor.”

That was frightening. Doctors needing a medic? He knew from his war years, THAT WAS BAD. He braced himself. The elevator doors opened. He hopped in and it dropped like a stone. “What’s the situation?” He’d been dealing with the police, and keeping Tony from punching anyone, for the last hour. “How’s Steve?”

“Captain Rogers is resting after surgery to remove the bullets. It went well for him.”

“Okay?”

“The surgery was… difficult. Doctors Simmons and Ross are not used to working on patients who are awake. It was very unnerving for them to work on Captain Rogers.”

Damn. Still, not as bad as an air strike. The doors opened and it wasn’t chaos but Thor looked damned relieved to see him. They were in a waiting area of couches and chairs. Betty had her head between her knees, breathing looked all right. Jemma swooned even as he moved forward, but Thor caught her before she hit the floor. “Betty? Y’all have an emergency pack around here?” He shrugged out of his wings and propped them by Mjolnir.

Betty pointed a trembling hand to a corner cabinet without otherwise moving.

Sam pulled it open and inside was a by-the-book US Air Force medic’s kit, fully stocked and loaded exactly like he’d kept his during his deployments. Only thing missing was the rubber chicken. He was gonna find out whose idea this was and kiss them full on the lips, he swore he would. He grabbed it, pulled out an ammonia capsule, popped it, and handed it to Betty. She held it under her
own nose, giving him a thumb’s up and pointing to Jemma.

Thor had laid her out on the couch and was taking her pulse. “Put some pillows under her feet.” Sam told him, and he did quickly.

He was taking her blood pressure when Betty came over, looking much more steady, and waved the ammonia capsule under Jemma’s nose. “I don’t think there’s anything much wrong other than what we just did, but keep an eye on that.” Betty said with a nod toward the cuff.

Jemma jerked and opened her eyes. “I don’t ever want to do that again.”

“Neither do I.” Betty agreed, dropping to sit on the floor next to Jemma’s head, and resting her own head beside her.

“We probably will.” Jemma said fatalistically, staring at the ceiling.

Sam gave Thor a ‘what the hell?’ look.

“The bullet removal was quite upsetting.” Thor agreed, and sat down on the floor himself. “I too wish to never repeat it.” Sam noticed then, there was dried blood on Thor’s hands and arms, and sprayed across his shirt.

The wall screen flicked on, and Barnes was there, looking pretty peaked, himself. “Steve’s asleep, Darcy and Bruce are keeping an eye on him. You okay in here?” He asked.

“No.” Jemma said definitely, sitting up.

Betty crawled up to sit beside her and they leaned into each other.

“Has it always been like that for him?” Thor asked Barnes.

“No, that actually went better than usual because of all the new technology you had. Back in the day it took seven or eight guys to hold him down and the screaming was constant.” Oh, Christ.

Jemma’s eyes started to roll back and Sam grabbed for another ammonia capsule.

-A-

Tony wearily stepped onto the private elevator and rested his head on the wall. “Status, JARVIS.”

The elevator began moving upward. “Captain Rogers is resting. Doctor Banner, Ms Lewis, and Sidekick are with him, in the small area off the common room. Doctor Foster and Ms Potts are in the penthouse, speaking quietly. Prince Thor, Sergeant Wilson, and Doctors Ross and Simmons are still on the medical floor.”

Tony simply leaned on the wall and wondered what in hell he was supposed to do next. The shout of Hydra had been heard by a couple hundred people, so every government agency had descended, demanding answers. Like he had them. Hello, he got shot at, did he look like he was in charge?

“Sir, scans indicate you have several cracked ribs.”

“I do?” He did?

“Indeed. I speculate from the impact of the bullet that went through Captain Rogers.” Tony shuddered, and the elevator doors opened onto the hospital floor. In the waiting room, both doctors were curled up together on the couch looking pretty rough, and Thor and Sam were sitting on the
floor. “Slacking off?” he asked without thinking.

“Trying not to puke, thanks.” Sam told him.

“Shit. What happened? Is everyone all right?” he rushed in, looking around.

“Steven is fine.” Thor assured him. “We, however, are not. Removing the bullets was quite traumatic for all involved.”

Tony thought about that and winced. “Ah. Yeah.”

Sam stood, giving him a once over. “You okay, man? You look kinda rocky, yourself.”

“JARVIS informs me I have cracked ribs.” He might be feeling them, now that they’d been pointed out.

JARVIS, being helpful, flashed some scans up. He’d outlined the cracks in red in case the humans he looked after weren’t paying attention.

“Yup, that’s cracked.” Sam agreed. “Take off your shirt, we’ll wrap them up.”

“Just give me a bandage, I’ll do it myself after a shower.” Damn if he was showing off his scars to everyone. Extremis had regrown his sternum and missing lung tissue and fixed a lot of other stuff (hooray, liver function!) but apparently cosmetics hadn’t been a priority. His chest looked like, well, like he’d had surgery in a cave, matter of fact.

Sam gave him a long look. “Why don’t we go up to the penthouse, you can shower, then I’ll wrap you up.”

That was probably as good as it was going to get. “Oh, fine.” He turned back to the ‘vator, and waited as Sam picked up his medical bag and his wings and got on too.

“You know who arranged for this medic’s field kit for me?” Sam asked.

That had seemed like obvious equipment, didn’t it? Had he gotten the wrong kind of kit? “I did, why-” he stopped to sputter. WHAT? “WHY IN HELL ARE YOU KISSING ME, WILSON? LET GO OR I’M TELLING PEPPER.”

-A-

They’d put Steve in a room off the main area on the common floor, so everyone could wait and worry together in relative comfort. Pepper had cried on him for about ten minutes (that was forever, in Pepper crying time; normally she squeezed out about four tears and then kicked someone’s ass, most often his) and fallen asleep on one of the couches wearing his old MIT tee shirt and a pair of his sweat pants. Everyone else had trickled in after that, wearing similar pajamas and carrying blankets and pillows. Sam, who was the only one of them still thinking, ordered in a mountain of food and turned on a binge-watch of Fawlty Towers before finally collapsing himself.

Tony was unable to sleep, in part because of the pain in his ribs. He finally shooed Darcy out of Steve’s room to sleep in a puppy pile with Jane and Thor, and took the easy chair she’d pulled in next to Steve’s bed. He laid a hand over Steve’s arm and said softly, “thanks for the rest of my life, you fucking idiot. I’m not used to owing people anything, so look out.”

Sidekick made a murf noise at him, so he patted her before he went for a wet washcloth. It looked like Steve bit through his own lip, and there was blood spatter all over him, and probably tears too.
At the first touch of the cloth to his face, Steve jerked awake, eyes locking onto Tony’s, not frightened, but intense and worried.

“Hey. Chill out, everything is fine, including you and your cat.” Steve relaxed a little at that but continued watching Tony as Tony wiped off his face and neck, then his hands, a little frown line between his eyebrows. “It’s been about six hours since that asshole tried to shoot us. He’s dead. Every alphabet agency in the country is on it. Everyone except May is in the Tower and safe. May is working with the Feds on the investigation. Go back to sleep.” Steve nodded and did.

Tony sat back down and took Steve’s hand and started to really think about his feelings. Not that they mattered, because he had Pepper. And Steve had Darcy. Everyone was paired off all nice and neat.

He hated that.

-A-

The layover at Heathrow had taken FAR too long, but then it always did. Wearily, Phil got out of the cab and trudged into the entrance of the Tower. He gave a wave toward the receptionist before stepping into the private elevator. “Director Coulson, it is very good to have you back.” JARVIS said, the elevator whisking upward.

He just bet. “What’s the status, JARVIS?”

“Everyone appears to be resting on the common floor, including Captain Rogers.”

Everyone? “Where is Barnes?”

“Ah. I apologize, I was not clear. Barnes is still in the Hulk Tank, and Hill is with him in observation on that floor. Agent May is still out, trying to oversee the investigation into the shooting. Everyone else is asleep on the common floor. Captain Rogers is being housed in a room off the common area that has been repurposed as a hospital room. Sidekick and Sir are with him.”

He made his way through the piles of people and pillows and blankets and went to the door of Steve’s room. Tony was dozing in the chair next to him, holding his hand. Interesting. Sidekick was curled up against Steve’s neck and shoulder and at Phil’s appearance, she raised her head, flicked her tail, then lowered it again.

At the cat’s movement, Tony woke and looked around. “Hey, Phil.” He was moving stiffly and Phil would have to find out about that soon.

“How is he?” His vitals looked fine, but from the speculation in Steve’s medical records, he doubted the bullet removal had been pleasant for anyone involved.

“Seems all right. Y’know, this whole superhero gig is a lot more fun when I’m the one getting shot at.”

“Mmm.” No shit, Stark. “Try to keep that in mind, next time you decide to do something heroic.”

Tony blinked at him. “What are you doing here?”

“Hill sent word, and my boy toy suddenly threw me over for a beautiful young blond and I left him in Europe in a snit. He can find his own way home, the unfaithful bastard.”

“Ah. Uh. Sorry?”
He couldn’t resist. “We got to have fake hate sex before I left, so that’s something.”

Tony chuckled at that, before wincing. “Damn, Phil, I don’t want to know that stuff.”

“Oh, sure you do. Can we get someone else in here to sit with him, and you can give me a rundown?”

“Yeah, ‘course, hang on.” Tony stood carefully.

“You were injured too?”

“One of the bullets went through him and hit me. I had on that new experimental body armor under my tux but it didn’t absorb all the impact. Couple cracked ribs and some bruising. Not much, in comparison.”

Phil felt for him. Those injuries were the WORST because everything hurt; every tiny movement, even breathing. “Taken any painkillers?”

“No.”

He’d get some food into him over the update, then medicate him. “Come on.”

Phil went out into the main room and nudged Darcy. She awoke with a jerk, then looked disoriented at him standing there. “Can you sit with Steve? I need to talk to Tony.”

“Yeah, sure.” she wandered into the room, barely awake, flopped into the chair, put her head down next to Steve’s hip, and by all appearances went back to sleep.

Phil gently steered Tony into the kitchen, sat him down and got out eggs and a pan.

“You can cook?” Tony asked over his coffee.

“Nothing complicated, but I lived with Clint for six, eight years.” It was hard to put a finger on exactly when Clint had moved in, and he and Natasha and Phil had always had keys to each others’ apartments and were in and out constantly, so that was no guide. “He made sure I could survive on my own.” The cooking lessons had been full of laughter and kissing; maybe he’d ask for more when Clint got home.

“Eight YEARS?” Tony repeated.

“Yes.” Was that a problem? Tony very famously didn’t judge; he not only said it, he meant it. (Given his past, it was as it should be, but so many people had pasts full of more debauchery than Tony’s and still managed to be judgmental hypocrites.) Tony had known about him and Clint long before they’d left town on this fact-finding mission.


Oh. THAT. “I think killing his car with him in it was enough.”

“I don’t.” Tony said simply. He took a drink, blew out a breath carefully. “We’re going to need Steve’s version of events; I still don’t know what the fuck. We were dancing—”

“You and Pepper?”

“No, me and Steve.” Phil must have given away something with his face, because Tony started to laugh, winced, and laid a hand on his side. “I know, right? I gave him some shit about friends
dancing together, so he danced with Pepper, then asked to dance with me. Apparently he had a point to make about the LGBTQA and etcetera community.”

Phil stared down at the eggs he was whisking, unusually moved. His childhood hero, dancing with another man to make a point. “Huh.” he finally got out.

“He may have mentioned you and Clint when I asked him what he was doing.” Tony said with a soft grin. “I myself am re-evaluating my opinions on Steve Rogers.”

That was good, then. His two field leaders needed to actually work together, not circle each other cautiously between arguments. “So then?” He dumped the eggs into the pan.

“I don’t even know. We’re dancing, or rather he’s stomping and I’m trying to avoid his feet and not laugh, then he yells ‘get down’ and he’s wrapped around me like a blanket, shots are fired and all is chaos.” Tony swallowed more coffee. “Repulsored the guy with the gun while trying to get Steve to the floor, didn’t even think about it. I guess there is such a thing as muscle memory.”

“You killed him?”

“No, I got lucky without JARVIS assisting on targeting, hit the gun, knocked the guy back a couple yards, gun flew off somewhere. Probably took off about half his hand, too.” Tony speculated on the last part thoughtfully. “Pepper comes over with towels, we’re trying to calm Steve and get the bleeding stopped, make some kind of plan. Security cuffs the guy, hauls him up, motherfucker yells ‘hail Hydra’ and keels over. Looked like the traditional cyanide capsule in the teeth, but I was about ten yards away with other things on my mind.”

Phil got out plates, seasoned the eggs, puttered a bit to let Tony catch his breath and calm down a little; he was more upset than Phil thought he even realized.

“Pepper took security while I packed Steve’s wounds. Once the gang got there – May, Simmons, and Ross – and loaded Steve up, I sent Pepper back to the Tower with them, and took another go at security. Thor and Sam arrived in there, somewhere. There were about five hundred guests and at least half of them got on social media and screamed about a Hydra attack at the Guggenheim and the Avengers showing up. With photos. Every alphabet agency you’ve ever heard of came running through town and descended like a plague of locusts. As far as I know, May’s still dealing with them. Hope she’s not on the lam for shooting anyone. If she is, let me know, I’ve got a place off the books in Canada she can use.”

Tony had no idea how true that last hope was. Phil hoped she wasn’t either, because it would be just like her. “You brought him back here?”

“Yeah, hospital floor, there’s a surgical suite there. Our people are as qualified to take care of him as anyone else on the planet, and at least we’d be familiar faces to him. And not security risks.”

“There’s a medical floor?”

Tony looked sheepish. “I put it in when I renovated the Tower after the Invasion. Kinda forgot it was there until we started working on the Winter Arm.”

“Of course you did.” Phil divided the eggs, gave Tony his, and sat down next to him at the counter. “They got the bullets out? He’s okay?”

“By all accounts yes and yes, but I got here not long after they finished and everyone was kinda grey and the whole waiting area reeked of smelling salts. Betty and Jem looked like they’d been through a war and even Thor was rattled.”
“During World War Two, the method of dealing with that situation was to get all the Howling Commandos and anyone else milling around to hold him down while they cut them out. None of the drugs worked.”

Tony dropped his fork and stared at Phil, horrified. “He KNEW that, and stepped in front of the bullets anyway?”

“Eat.” Phil said gently.

“You know that’s how I had chest surgery, right?” Tony asked, white as a sheet, not eating.

Hell. “No, I didn’t. I’m sorry.” Phil said softly.

Tony seemed to shake himself, winced, and went back to eating slowly. “No wonder he’s exhausted.”

“His body shuts down to heal after injury, as well.”

“So he IS responding normally, for him.”

“Yes. It all sounds normal, for Steve definitions of normal.” Phil got up, rummaged in the extensive first aid kit they kept over the sink, and laid a couple pills down next to Tony’s coffee.

He looked apprehensive. “Are those nars? I can’t take nars.”

He was fucking this all up today. “Sorry. Should have asked.” Phil took them back, rummaged some more. “Anti-inflammatories.” he explained, and handed over different pills.

Tony washed them down, in what Phil realized after the fact (fucking it all up) was a major act of trust. “It’s not an addiction thing. Narcs weren’t my idea of fun, even back when I was using. I get really nasty dreams from them.”

Phil considered what Tony Stark would consider a nasty dream, and hung on to his poker face. “I understand.”

Tony hesitated for a moment, and then admitted “you are not the guy I thought you were, when we met.”

“I was closer to it, when we met. Death changes a lot. You’re not the guy I thought you were, either.”

They finished their eggs quietly. Phil wondered if he was becoming friends with Tony Stark. He was starting to actively like the guy, not just respect him. Wasn’t that a sign of Stockholhm Syndrome? Or the apocalypse?

-A-

There was something wrapped around his neck. It wasn’t dangerously tight, but it was snug. He lifted a hand to remove whatever it was, and someone else’s hand caught his. “Leave it alone, punk, it’s killing some of the pain.”

His eyes flew open and hey, he could focus them again a little bit, that was nice. The room was dim and smelled of chicken soup, and Sidekick was curled against his neck, and- “Bucky?” he croaked.

“In the flesh.” Buck got a glass of water and held the straw to his lips. “Drink.”
He did. “How.”

Bucky nodded, and Steve finally noticed Bruce and Thor in the room along with them. Bruce was poking at medical equipment, Thor in an easy chair in the corner, smiling at him. “They let me come up for a visit.”

“How?” Steve told them all. Breathing hurt like hell; he could feel his lungs knitting back together, but the serum usually went with lungs first, then ribs, so his rib cage was in a dozen pieces. He worked on breathing a while. It got easier when Buck propped him up.

“Just like old times, you and the damned asthma.” Buck got him arranged to his own liking, then picked up a thin, square, dense foam pillow. “The experts say this will help support your ribs from the outside. We kept trying to put it against you and you kept pushing us away. Gonna let us help?”

“Sure.” Buck, used to caring for him from way back, carefully nudged his arm aside, and laid the pillow against him. It seemed to form around him, and hey, that DID feel better. Bucky lifted his arm and arranged it to hold the pillow in place.

“How are you feeling?” Bruce asked.

He started to say ‘fine’ and caught Bucky’s eye. Oh all right then. “Better than I usually do at this point. How long have I been out?”

“Oh, sorry.” Bruce glanced at a clock. “The shooting was last night. It’s been about twelve hours.”

Wow. “I feel a lot better than usual at this point. Still hurts like hell, but the lungs are knitting together and the ribs will be next.”

“You can feel it?” Bruce asked curiously. Bruce was always curious. Steve liked that about him.

“Yeah, kinda itchy-prickly.” He took a slightly bigger breath, thanks to the pillow. “What’s around my neck?”

“A whole-body version of that electrical gizmo Jemma used on me.” Buck said. “They don’t think it worked perfectly, but it seemed to help. They’re already fine-tuning it.”

Steve only remembered screaming once. The pain had been bad, but not excruciating like he remembered from the war. “It did help. You know how it used to go. Usually I’m not even conscious for another day or two.”

Bruce wrote busily on the tablet he had with him. “It seems to me, we should have discussed this before you went and got shot.”

“I wasn’t planning on it last night.” Steve pointed out.

“You never PLAN on it.” Bucky said with complete disgust.
Equal and opposite reactions.

Chapter Summary

“We are now going to talk about my Daddy issues, and I am going to build this board to keep my hands busy so I don’t want to drink.” Tony said absently.

Chapter Notes

It's Friday and I kinda wanna get this entire thing posted before Memorial Day Weekend (next weekend for youse overseas) so bonus chapter.

It took most of the day, working with Maria and Melinda, to get the alphabet agencies to understand that the Avengers would be happy to cooperate with their investigations but that it was THEIR job to look into the shooting, not their own. Not that the Avengers wouldn’t be, of course, but Pepper did NOT like this attitude where police and Feds went “oh, Avengers”, shrugged, and tried to walk away. This was NOT the way to look like law-abiding citizens, and the Feds needed to do their damned jobs.

James had come up from the Hulk Tank for most of the morning to look after Steve, and the dynamic between the two of them made her want to start hugging people, them first. It was very obvious that James had spent a great deal of time taking care of Steve during illnesses, and it was just as obvious Steve was used to it. Before he went back to the Tank, Pepper did break down and give him a hug. She knew she shouldn’t, that he was still very agitated when touched, but she couldn’t hug Steve yet.

Plus she was indestructible so he could freak out and no harm done. Kinda selfish BUT SHE NEEDED TO HUG SOMEONE. She moved slowly and didn’t hang on tightly, but wrapped her arms around James and stood for a moment.

“Uh.” James said, very carefully patting her back with his flesh hand and not otherwise moving in any way.

“I know this upsets you and I’ll stop, but we still appreciate how you look after Steve.” Pepper said.

“Oh.” James smiled and relaxed the tiniest bit, giving her a faint squeeze back before quickly stepping away. “It’s what we do. What we’ve always done.”

Yes, she was understanding their relationship better and better.

After lunch, everyone settled down and most went back to their apartments; Steve was clearly on the mend and the overwhelming worry had eased off. She’d had a partner’s desk brought in and set up with supplies and equipment in one of the quieter corners of the common room, and now Darcy and Phil were sitting opposite each other, chatting easily and managing the social media chaos that had been sparked the night before.

Pepper was reasonably sure that if she threw in with the two of them, they could take over the world.
It was good to have a backup plan.

Steve was alone in his room, resting quietly, his cat still napping with him. Pepper didn’t know if anyone had actively tried to train her, but she’d been great, making trips down to her litter box in Steve’s apartment, the kitchen for food, and returning to Steve, hopping up with him and guarding him with little fuss. This time, she was laying on Steve’s lap and he was petting her as she groomed his other hand.

Softly, she went in, sat carefully on the edge of his bed. He cracked his eyes and smiled at her.

“How are you feeling?” Pepper asked gently. “The truth, don’t give me the heroic bullshit.” She reached up and brushed at his hair, laid her hand on his cheek for a moment.

“Better than expected.” Steve assured her. “Really. Back in the day it would have taken three or four days to get to this stage.”

Dear god.

She leaned in and kissed his forehead. “Thank you.”

Steve smiled again, eyelids drooping. “You’re welcome.”

Pepper settled into the chair beside his bed and held his hand.

-A-

He called everyone in for dinner, including Kate, and made sure ALL the science geeks were there; they had a tendency to be hit or miss on meal attendance, getting involved in their lab work and forgetting what time it was. He sympathized, but Tony needed everyone there. He even hauled in Barnes via wall screen.

“Right.” Everyone was seated, eating brain-searing curry Bruce had thrown together with Betty’s help. Tony had noticed, the less warning Bruce got about cooking, the more the menu veered toward whatever Bruce felt like eating, and most of the time Bruce felt like eating vegetables that were on fire.

No one complained, although a pitcher of milk was added to the table and passed around (and refilled) often.

“It’s pretty clear that Hydra is trying to either slow us down, distract us, or flat-out kill us now. Probably in relation to us going after them, maybe retaliation. Project Insight was their big move and it’s smoking rubble and they’re exposed. So far we’re only gathering data, but they have to know Captain America isn’t gonna sit around and do nothing after the whole debacle over the Potomac.” He glanced up at Barnes. “Is it okay if we share your run on Hydra, before you turned yourself in?”

Barnes looked a little apprehensive. “All right.” He looked at everyone at the table. “Basically I took down all the Hydra bases in North America that could be taken down by one man.” There was some shock, and a lot of coughing, and some grins and thumbs-up. “I had to put a pretty big dent in their operations. Partly it was revenge, but I also wanted to interfere with their ability to come after me. Didn’t claim to be the Avengers doing it, but I didn’t deny it either. Stayed on the down low, went through and wiped ‘em out.”

“So they could be blaming us for your swathe of destruction.” Tony speculated.

Barnes winced. “Yeah, I guess they could. I didn’t spray paint ‘Avengers Were Here’ on the walls,
but I didn’t say it was me, either. Sorry.”

“Nah, don’t ever be sorry about wiping out Hydra stuff.”

Everyone else kind of chuckled and agreed. Tony decided to leave out the body count, they’d see it for themselves when they looked at the details. “JARVIS, put the after-action report on the Avengers’ server for everyone.”

“Done, Sir.”

“JARVIS and I have heightened security, and have been running background checks on anyone coming near the Avengers floors like you would NOT BELIEVE, but we’ve still got this itty-bitty issue in that, as soon as you leave the Tower, it’s open season.” Tony told them all. Several of the actual Avengers looked annoyed, most of the support staff looked worried. Betty was holding Bruce’s hand and she only did that when they were both upset.

“For now, am I being a bastard to suggest that we all go out in pairs, at least, if not groups? I know some of us are pretty tough to kill, and others are pretty tough to kidnap, but why be stupid? See Steve for reference. The buddy system is never really a bad idea.”

“I didn’t know you had this much common sense, Stark.” Phil said in his calm, reasoned, being-an-arsehole voice. Which meant he agreed.

Might as well work on this whole honesty thing everyone was bitching about. “I don’t, really, until I start worrying about the non-super support staff, and I know they’ll never go for the buddy system unless I tell the rest of us to do it, too.” That got a lot of smiles from around the table. Next order of business. “Next, Bishop. I know you’ve got a high-security penthouse but you still travel between here and there a lot. You were there when they went for Pepper and stopped them, so you’re on their radar now. You want a room at the super-powered house party? Permanently, or until this is over, your choice.”

He was prepared to do more of a sales pitch, but Darcy and Skye both shouted “YES!” and gave each other and Kate high fives. Before he knew it, both women were up and around the table and hugging Kate and then there was this… really hot and kinda pagan girl dance in the kitchen and they dragged Jemma into it and it was beautiful and wild and “we are all doomed.”

Pepper smiled at them, then at him, and passed him more rice.

A decade ago, five versions of Pepper in his life would have sounded like his worst nightmare. Now he was kind of amused. Hell, he was getting old.

-A-

The next time he opened his eyes, he felt reasonably good. Darcy was sitting with him, and she looked up and smiled. “Hi.”

“Hi.” he answered. His voice sounded normal, so he really hadn’t done much screaming, which meant the neck thing had worked. Even if it hadn’t felt like it at the time. “What time is it?”

“About nine, the evening after you got shot. Been about twenty-four hours.” She put her tablet aside and laid a hand on his. “You aren’t losing any time.”

Ah, so they had all seen through him about that. Well, waking up once after losing seventy years, he thought he was entitled to a few issues, right?
“Do you think you can eat? James sent someone out to Ferdinando’s for minestrone.”

That actually sounded delicious. “Okay.”

“Tell me when it hurts. I mean it.” She pushed a button to elevate his bed, and he didn’t stop her until he was sitting almost fully upright. A hospital table was wheeled over his lap, and a bowl of soup set up for him. “You want to try this yourself, or you want me to do it?”

Experimentally, he held out his right hand; that was the side that hadn’t been shot. Huh. He wasn’t even shaky. Modern medicine was pretty impressive, even when the drugs didn’t work. “I think I’ve got it.”

“Uh huh.” Darcy said skeptically. She swathed him in a towel and a napkin before giving him the soup spoon.

The first spoonful of soup went down like ambrosia and he almost moaned. The second was just as good. “How much of this do we have?”

“A gallon, but James said you only get a quart at a time and to remember Lubeck.”

He would NOT laugh, because that would hurt. He ate more soup and could swear he felt his body soaking up the nutrients.

Sam popped in the door. “Hey. You’re awake.”

“I seem to be.” He agreed, and went back to his soup.

Darcy, bless her, left so they could talk, pausing to pat Sidekick and kiss his cheek. She may have called him a name, he didn’t quite catch it.

Sam dropped into the seat Darcy had vacated. “How do you feel?”

“Kinda crappy, but better than usual after something like this.”

“I’ll let Jem and Betty know. They were both kinda upset; aren’t used to working on conscious patients in trauma situations.”

Steve thought of that and winced a little. “Do I need to apologize?”

“Nah, but you might be patient if they want to hug you when you’re mended.”

“Fair enough.” He ate. “This is the best soup I ever tasted.”

Sam laughed. “This one time, in a place I probably shouldn’t name, we got to an Army base, FOB, and had food that wasn’t out of a box and it was the best damn food I ever ate. You KNOW how bad Army food is.”

Steve grinned, and went back to his soup. “Everyone else is okay?”

“Yeah. Kate is moving in for safety. Tony told her it could be permanent or temporary, up to her, but considering the girl dance celebration, I’m thinking it’ll be permanent.”

“She reminds me of Peggy.”

“Who, Kate?”
“Well, all of the women here, really, the intelligence and confidence and all. But Kate, she is so impatient with all this brave male superhero business and ready to kick ass at a moment’s notice. She is STILL giving me grief over that botched break-in.”

“Me too.”

“Darcy wants to be Pepper when she grows up. She told me.” Steve said, and went back to his soup once again.

Sam produced a carafe from somewhere and refilled his bowl. “She’s well on her way.”

Steve ate and let Sam get to whatever he was really there for.

“Seriously though, man, are you okay?”

Huh. “You mean the getting shot thing?”

Sam blinked. “Uh, yeah. Kinda traumatic.”

Steve winced, trying not to laugh. “You doing the shrink thing, keeping my secrets?”

“JARVIS, lock it down.”

“Done, Sergeant Wilson.”

Sam spread his hands. “Talk away, my man.”

“During the war I got shot fairly regularly.”

“I’ve seen your purple hearts list. I know. You should not be allowed out alone.”

Oh. Okay. “Getting shot was just, I don’t know, cost of doing business, right? I was the one who healed quickly, so of course I’d do the riskier stuff.”

“Of course.” Sam said dryly.

“Through-and-throughs, especially one at a time, I can shrug those off. Didn’t even report them usually. Often as not I’d heal by the time I got back to base. Some pain, the guys yelling at me, Jacques swearing at me in French, and I was good to go.”

“Uh huh.” Sam said, very clearly thinking SOMETHING rude, but not saying it.

“For me, the trauma, the psych stuff you’re talking about, happened when I got shot and the bullets didn’t come back out.”

“Like last night.”

Steve nodded. “If we couldn’t cut them out right away, I’d be completely healed over by the time I got back to base, and THEN they’d cut them out.” Steve gave Sam what he knew was a weak not-really-smile. “The base would clear out so they didn’t have to listen to me screaming. At least last night the wounds were fresh. It’s not as bad that way.”

“Jesus, Steve.”

Steve shrugged with the shoulder on his uninjured side, gestured for more soup. “Then I’d have nightmares for at least a week. Not getting shot. Getting cut into. I’ve never had an anxiety attack
since the serum, but the closest I came was in hospitals. Even now, the whiff of the wrong cleaner or medicines and I’m almost back there.”

“But you step in front of bullets anyway.”

That seemed… was he missing something? A trick question? “Well, yeah? When I have to. That would have killed Tony. I didn’t know if the bullets would go through, but I have to tell you I was sure hoping so when they hit. What am I supposed to do, stand back and let Tony – or someone else – DIE, because I don’t want to hurt for a while?”

“Some people would.”

“Some people are assholes.”

Sam laughed at that. “True enough, but damn, Steve, maybe try to make better choices about when you do this?”

He lifted his eyes to Sam’s, let himself show how much he hated all this. The pain, the recovery, the blood, the worry of everyone around him. Damn, even his cat was upset. And he HURT. Lung shots were the worst because they took him back to being that skinny little asthmatic kid who couldn’t breathe. “I actually do try to.”

“Shit.” Sam breathed, and reached out to squeeze Steve’s arm. “Sorry, you seem so cavalier about it.”

“Because Tony and Pepper are horrified already. What are they going to do if I let on I hate this and dread it every time it happens?”

“You’re a stand-up guy, Steve Rogers.”

“Maybe I am, and maybe I’m not, but when Betty and Jemma come to hug me, I’m hugging them back. This has been almost pleasant in comparison to similar wounds I got back in the day.”

“It would do them good to hear it. They were both really upset after. Even Thor looked a little rocky, I didn’t know anything upset that guy.”

Steve emptied his bowl and wished for more. But he knew from experience that would end badly. “I figured Thor would be used to that kind of stuff, have you heard some of his stories?”

“The Tale of the Warriors Three and the Bilgesnipe, in rhyming couplets? I thought I was gonna sprain something, I was laughing so hard.”

“You ever think our lives are weird, Sam?”

“Every goddamn day.”

-A-

Things settled back into their routine pretty quickly. It was the weekend, but everyone was a workaholic and didn’t pay much attention. It was the major reason why Tony and Pepper, as bosses, never said a word about a long lunch or an afternoon at the Met, during the week; from JARVIS’ estimations, everyone was putting in sixty hour weeks AND happy, so they weren’t going to mess with a system that not only functioned, but was producing beyond expectation.

He got off the ‘vator on the lab floor, intending to finish building U that day, and hauled up short at
Darcy, hunched over her desk, a couple pens and pencils stuck in her hair, a cup of hot chocolate at her elbow. She was scowling at her computer screen and flicking through something with a stylus while talking to herself.

“What are you doing here?” He asked. Demanded. Whatever. He was the boss, right? He could talk however he wanted. (Pepper would kill him.)

Darcy didn’t seem to register his tone of voice all that much, but scowled at him over her glasses anyway. “Trying to figure out a way to spin ‘Hydra at the Guggenheim’ that makes us sound golden and puts the whole mess in the lap of the Feds. Got any ideas?”

“Uh. Talk to Phil?”

“Have been.” she grumbled, and glared at her screen again.

Leave it. He was going to leave it, and be a mature adult and respect boundaries. He knew how to do that. HE DID. He walked into his lab, got all the way in the door. Then gave up, turned around, and went back out. “Why aren’t you with Steve?”

Darcy looked at him like he was insane. “Because he’s asleep. Then when he wakes up, if no one is there to talk to him, JARVIS will tag me or whoever he wants to talk to.”

Boundaries. Boundaries. Shut up, Stark, get your ass in the lab, and- “You don’t want to be with him?”

Darcy seemed to surface from whatever data she was sifting through, leaned back in her chair, and glared at him. “What are you getting at?”

How to put this without getting a face full of knuckles. Or Pepper on his ass. Most likely, both. He paced. He waved his arms some. “You’re together, right, shouldn’t you be together?” He did not leer or wink. REALLY.

Darcy stared at him for a long time. He was beginning to feel like something under a microscope when she finally asked, “…you think we’re dating? Or something?”

Met, jazz club, kissing in art stores! “Yeah?”

“Men.” Darcy said with utter disgust. “We’re FRIENDS. He’s a nice guy and I’ve been dragging him out of the Tower because otherwise he’d spend all day in a cell with James or trashing heavy bags in the gym. I’ve never been in New York before, he’s nice company to explore the city.”

“Oh.” OH. He walked onto the elevator in a daze, without another word. Darcy swore at him as he was leaving but he pretended not to hear.

-A-

She was celebrating the weekend by working in the penthouse, in shorts and a tank top. ‘Working’ wasn’t too onerous, though, laying on the couch and flipping through reports on her tablet. After all the chaos at the Guggenheim, it took about twenty-four hours for everyone to settle again; she’d give it to this group, even the support staff rolled with things. Thor, Phil, and Skye had gone with Kate to pack up clothing and other essentials until highly secure moving crews could be located to bring in her furniture. Until she had her own she’d be staying with Darcy. Maybe after, as well; the two women had hit it off and Pepper could see them setting up quite a bachelor pad together.

She’d started on yet another R and D report. Tony was head of the department, and his reports were
surprisingly concise and useful; she suspected JARVIS had a hand in that. But like all good managers, Tony delegated, and some of the project heads were long on technical brilliance and very, very short on communication skills. Given how well Darcy was working out with the Main lab floor, Pepper thought she might find a few more scientist herders like her; they were worth the salary to keep the brilliant ones focused and provide reports that actually made sense.

She’d talk to Darcy about how to word the job ads and get her to help with the interviews.

Tony walked in, looking rather dazed and she happily put the report aside. “Tony?”

“They aren’t dating.”

It took her a moment. “Darcy and Steve?”

“Yeah. They’re hanging out together. Friends kind of thing. I think Darcy’s added him to her list of people to manage.” He dropped down on the coffee table beside her.

In the past week or so, Tony had loosened up a lot around Steve. She thought he was finally seeing through all the baggage and bullshit his father had instilled and seeing Steve for who he was. Steve, not Captain America. She wasn’t so wild about the propaganda figure herself, on principle. “All right?” She wasn’t sure what Steve’s dating status had to do with their lives right now. But Tony liked to know about people and had boundaries that were different from most people’s.

“I don’t even know. Just.” He raised his hands, let them fall. “How do I feel about this?”

She tried not to laugh. “I don’t know, how DO you feel?”

“He should be happy. He’s been through a lot of shit and he’s a nice guy.”

It did indeed sound like Tony was finally seeing STEVE. Thank goodness. “You can’t buy him a Russian bride on eBay.”

“I probably could.”

“You CAN, but you MAY NOT.”

Tony chuckled at that. “Yeah, I’m not going to. Why am I so invested in this?”

“Because he’s the guy you follow into battle and trust to strategize to get you all home again?”

“There is that.”

She wondered if he was starting to fall for Steve. Pepper herself had come to love the guy while she was recovering from the whole Extremis disaster. He’d been so kind and patient, and yet that dry, snarky humor came through. “It’s okay to care about him, you know.” she said softly.

“I never expected to. Maybe that’s what this is about.”

Maybe.

“What are you doing?” Tony suddenly asked, taking in her loungewear and her work tablet. “Are you working?”

“Trying to make sense of R and D reports.”

“Oh, I can help with that. Sit up.”
They rearranged themselves on the couch, until she was using him as a surprisingly comfortable pillow. “Now, what’s the question?”

“The software division is working on that update for the cell phone OS, and the reports aren’t making any sense. I think they’re trying to dazzle me with bullshit.”

Tony settled in, kissed the top of her head absently, and looked at the tablet over her shoulder. “They really should know better than that, by this time.”

-A-

Over dinner that night, Kate heaved a sigh and announced “I’m having lunch with my sister Monday. According to our buddy system, I need someone to go along.”

Phil glanced around the table. Everyone looked willing, but apparently it was up to him to take charge. “What are you looking for? Do you want anyone in particular?”

Kate put aside her fork and propped her chin on her fist. “I don’t want to give her the satisfaction of taking any of you. This is only happening because she saw all those videos of our lunch at Mario’s and she called and bugged the shit out of me until I agreed to this. She wants to use me to meet all of you, and to hell with that. To hell with her. But here I am needing to take one of you. Fuck. I’d cancel but she’ll bug the shit out of me more.”

“Take a personal assistant. You’re working for me now, you’re MUCH too busy to take a lunch that isn’t a working lunch.” Pepper said. “We’ll fix up one of these guys as your PA.”

“Who, though?” Kate asked. “Tony’s too recognizable, Steve’s benched, Clint and Natasha aren’t here. I am NOT taking Sam.” She turned to Sam. “She is a racist bitch and I am not putting you through that.” she pointed when Sam started to say something. “Don’t even start to say it’s okay, you can handle it. Of course you can handle it. I refuse to subject you to my asshole family.”

“That leaves me and Thor.” Bruce said easily. He turned to Thor. “Wanna play rock-paper-scissors for it?”

Thor chuckled. “No, my friend, you have your lab work. And I believe I would enjoy this assignment.”

Kate stared at him blankly. “You would?”

“Certainly. Diplomacy and play-acting have many things in common. I have a suit. Perhaps some glasses?”

Kate stared.

“We need a wig or something,” Darcy contributed. “Your hair is WAY too recognizable. And PAs don’t have hair like that anyway. Something short and brown.”

“There we go.” Pepper said, smiling at both of them.

“I’m busy Wednesday afternoon.” Sam contributed. “Doing a favor for someone. If anyone wants to go drink coffee at the Viaduct while I hang out for a couple hours, it’d help the whole buddy system thing.”

“I can do that.” Thor said easily.
“Thanks.”

They nodded at each other, and Phil AT LAST felt like he was watching a team come together. And that Thor was much more of a team player than he’d expected.

“What’s the word on Clint and Natasha?” Tony asked. “I assume you’re waiting on them to give us the word on your little fact-finding mission?”

“Yes.” Phil agreed. “It’s looking like Sokovia to me, and they agreed and that’s where they are now. They should be back mid-week, we’ll brief everyone then.”

“How’s Steve?” Skye asked.

“Slurping up minestrone by the liter and about to move on to solid food. Healing at an amazing rate.” Jemma told everyone. “I expect him to be up and about tomorrow, though we should all keep an eye on him and keep him from doing much of anything. A little walking about will be enough.”

“Keep Steve from doing something he wants to do.” Hill repeated skeptically.

“Maybe if I threaten him with Hulk.” Bruce said thoughtfully.

They all laughed. Phil was pleased; Bruce was beginning to joke about the Hulk once in a while. He was starting to trust them all. The team was beginning to shape up.

-A-

“Sorry to drag you down here.” Tony said when he walked into the shop.

“No problem.” Sam tried to assure him. “It’s all good.” Many people were more comfortable talking on their own turf – he was himself. He wasn’t going to argue. Hell, he wasn’t even leaving the building, it wasn’t like it was a huge inconvenience.

“JARVIS?” Tony said absently. Sam watched in amusement as the giant block of metal holding the door open leaned forward on an automated piston of some kind, and the door closed. The glass walls all went dark. Suddenly it was a lot more private.

“Why d’you keep the chunk of metal there, if the door’s automated anyway?” Sam asked without really thinking. Mild curiosity, nothing more.

“That’s the last Jericho missile ever manufactured by Stark Industries. Verified via serial number.” Tony said. “I keep it there to remind me, not really to hold the door open.”

Sam tried not to wince, but Tony caught it.

“Yeah. It was in North Korea.”

Sam gave up and winced.

“Yeah.” Tony agreed. He was hunched over itty bitty parts and a magnifier on his work bench, and Dum-E was watching closely as he soldered tiny little things together.

“Can I sit?” Sam asked, not wanting to mess up whatever the hell Tony was doing. It looked delicate.

“Oh. Yeah, sorry. Shit, I’m bad at hosting. Want a drink or something?”
“No, that’s fine. I didn’t wanna mess up whatever you’re working on.”

“Finishing up circuit boards for U. Maybe this one,” he jerked a thumb at Dum-E’s camera-hand, “will get the hell out of my face.”

Dum-E chirped like ‘I heard that’ and didn’t otherwise react. Sam wasn’t so good at robot psychology (was that even a thing?) but he didn’t think Dum-E was gonna be leaving Tony alone any time soon.

Sam sat and watched Tony connect tiny little things to a board with molten metal, his hands amazingly deft at it. OF COURSE Tony Stark was goddamn skilled at building things, but he was still impressed.

“We are now going to talk about my Daddy issues, and I am going to build this board to keep my hands busy so I don’t want to drink.” Tony said absently, using what looked like a nail file on the end of his soldering iron.

Points, again, for bluntness and knowing his goals, Sam decided. “Okay.” Given Tony’s psychology, Sam already didn’t think much of Howard Stark. So this would be challenging from a personal friend point of view.

“I was, hm, thirteen or fourteen, in some exclusive boarding school, and got thrown out because I got caught kissing a boy.”

Wow. Poker face time.

Tony waved his hand. “The other boy in question was there voluntarily, we both were. It was a curiosity kind of thing. For what it’s worth. My dad beat the shit out of me and gave me a lecture about how Captain America would be ashamed and then locked me in my room until he could find another boarding school to unload me on. Mom was at a spa in Switzerland, I don’t think Dad ever told her. The shame, of course. Jarvis, that would be Edwin Jarvis, the guy who actually raised me, kept me fed and supplied with books and transistors and stuff.”

Sweet baby Jesus. “You know he was wrong, right?” he had to say. Dumb, heavy-handed question, but SHIT.

Tony gave him the ‘you’ve got to be kidding’ look and snorted. “Please. Dad was wrong about ninety percent of the time, and the other ten percent was when he was talking physics. The law of gravity, that one he got okay.” He shook his head. “Sorry, the whole topic makes me pissy.”

“I don’t blame you a bit.”

Tony did his half snort, half not laugh thing again. “Well, not to dwell on really boring, really dismal details, every time I did anything that wasn’t Howard Stark’s definition of heterosexual, American conservative white male, I got the lecture on how his best friend Captain America would be ashamed. Needless to say, nothing I did measured up to Howard Stark’s standards as set by Captain America.” He caught the look on Sam’s face. “Chill. Most of this I’ve worked through over the years. The childhood shit, I mean. There is new stuff. Wait for it.”

Sam had to laugh.

“Right. So Captain America, example of perfection as defined by Howard Stark. Of course, by the time I hit adulthood I hated Captain America with a seething passion. He AND my dad could go fuck themselves.”
Sam was beginning to understand more of their disastrous first meeting Nat had told him about.

“Dad died – not what we’re gonna discuss today – and I moved on, and was getting pretty far along on defining myself beyond my childhood and yay, Tony’s almost not fucked up.” he continued. “And then, of course, what should happen, but they find Captain America in a glacier somewhere and thaw him out, and motherfucker’s still alive.” Tony shook his head. “Our lives are fucking weird. Next thing I know, I’m standing over a fucking SPACE ALIEN in Stuttgart, and there’s the boogieman of my childhood, in the flesh, going ‘Mister Stark’, all polite and shit.” He paused. “I need a drink. You want coffee?”

“Sure.”

They settled back in with mugs, Tony having given up on his soldering. “I swear a lot. The more I care or feel about something, the more I swear. Sorry for the upcoming.”

“Dude. I was in the Air Force. In combat. I can handle it.”

That got a genuine laugh. “Fair enough. So here’s Captain goddamn America, all up in my grill, telling me I’m not taking things seriously enough. I wanted to fucking kill him for that alone. Like he knows what and how I fucking think. I’m telling him to put the suit on so I can punch his perfect fucking teeth in, and hell breaks loose and we save the world, hooray. We make polite noises at each other after the fight because manners, but fuck him, and he goes off to find himself and buy silly tourist tee shirts, and I go off to have a billion anxiety attacks and build a couple dozen Iron Man suits and annoy the shit out of Pepper. And we ignored each other all to hell and were doing a damn good job of it until that motherfucker Killian dosed Pepper with Extremis last Christmas. Anyone give you detail on that?”

He was staring at Sam with that dark, fathomless look that Sam SWORE could see through his brain to the back of his skull and every thought between. “No. Y’all suck at backstory.”

“It’s because the backstory fuckin’ sucks. Right. Pepper was dosed with the volatile form of Extremis that made people explode.”

“Jesus.”

“Yeah. Bruce and I got her fixed up, but we couldn’t remove it entirely. It’s entrenched; bonded to her DNA. Fucking Killian, that fuckface, I’d kill him again if I could, triggers and my shit behavior be damned-” He broke off and took a deep breath. “Another shit backstory for another day. So suddenly Pepper has super strength and speed and can light shit on fire and she’s accidentally breaking everything she touches. That is the only time, ever, that I have seen Pepper freak out. Think of our history, of all the things she could have freaked out about. Spoiled billionaire, explosions, kidnappings, alien invasions, she shrugs and rides them out. She’s a rock. This time, she was freaking out. It was bad. And JARVIS suggests calling Steve. After all, he’s been through a change like that; of all of us, he’d be the most useful to help her. I said sure, what the fuck, give him a call. Figured we’d never hear from him because he’s an asshole, too busy saving the world and being heroic and shit.” He went for another drink. Water this time. Sam was still working on his coffee.

“Instead, motherfucker turns up pretty much the instant he gets the message, and puts his life on hold for two months to help her out. She burned the shit out of him more than once, like third degree stuff even, and he never batted an eye. She’s crying on him and apologizing and he’s patting her on the back saying it’s okay while his hair grows back or some shit, and there he is, ladies and gents, the sonofabitching bane of my childhood, comforting the love of my life. I really wanted to rip his liver out. Through his nose.”
“I didn’t hear anything about the two of you going at each other.” Sam said carefully. Shit, he hadn’t even thought of this aspect. No wonder Tony was standoffish with Steve.

“Rhodey talked me down. A lot. Like, hourly. I avoided Steve in all ways possible. Steve kind of got the message and let me be.” He really laughed, then, and decided to go back to his soldering thing because Dum-E kept poking him. “Basically it all went about as you’d expect until he moved in. Then, all of a sudden Clint and Darcy decided Thor and Steve need pop culture lessons so I find them in the common room at all hours, watching movies and listening to music, and stuff. One night, I’m wandering through before bed, and Steve’s playing Mario Kart, and have you heard him swear?”

“Army.” Sam reminded him.

“He REALLY swears. Like a lot. Impressively. With a Brooklyn accent.” Tony shook his head. “He gives Natasha shit about her appearance and past; I keep waiting for her to rip his face off but she smiles like she’s proud of him. And he rescued a goddamn kitten that he named SIDEKICK, not George Washington or something. Sidekick. Like he gets the superhero joke. Natasha cut Fury’s eye patch OFF HIS FACE and we had that impromptu party, remember? He shows up and I figure oh here we go, lecture on decorum or propriety or some shit, and instead the two of you drag in flowers and pierogis. Pepper and I went off to slag Fury’s car, and he was right there with us from the planning stages, threatens Fury, and then helps us cover it up.”

Not much to say to this. “Yep.” Sounded like Steve.

“Asshole took three bullets for me the other night.”

“I know. He does that kind of thing, too.” Too damned often.

“What do I do with that?” Tony dropped his tools and flung his hands in the air. “We were dancing together. He asked me to dance, because he knew people would take photos and talk and he wanted to support Clint and Phil. He said so. While he was dancing with me. And he’s a terrible dancer. Mister perfection can’t dance for shit. It’s actually kinda hilarious.” He got up and started pacing.

Sam leaned on the work bench, wondered exactly what he was supposed to say. “That’s all him, you know. The heroic stuff and the rest.”

“No.” Tony swung around and pointed. “No, that’s the thing. That’s not Captain America. That’s Steve. And it has occurred to me in the last week or two that I never knew Steve Rogers at all.”

Tony waved his arms and paced some more. “Suddenly, here’s this motherfucker I’ve been having thrown in my face since childhood, this known quantity, and I don’t know a damn thing about him.”

“It sounds to me like your dad never really knew him.” Sam said as politely as possible.

Tony grunted. “Should have suspected that thirty years ago. The old man always did suck at people.” He paced some more. “I guess my question here is, is this normal?”

Uh.

Some of the confusion must have showed on his face, because Tony smiled a little and clarified. “The two identities, like two different people thing. It has occurred to me that I do it myself, I have a public and private persona, but I’m not normal. Is it common in other people?”

“Ah. Actually, having a public and private persona IS pretty common, assuming we mean people whose personae aren’t that different, one to the other. More formal and reserved in public, more easy
and open at home, that’s normal. Everybody does that. My momma does that. Now, Mother Theresa to the world and serial killer at home, that’s more unusual. But how you mean? Psychology is coming to realize it’s way more common than we thought. Among the profoundly gifted, it’s seen as a valuable coping skill. Pretty much all profoundly gifted people who have successful social lives do it."

“So Steve’s normal.”

“No, dude. You. Profoundly gifted.” Sam had been reading up like crazy, the last week. Tony deserved a lot more respect than he got just for dealing with his IQ, let alone the shit is idiot father piled on him, and reality chewing on him.

Tony blinked at that.

“As for everyone else around here, the superheroes I mean, I think we all do it as a defense mechanism. I’m doing it myself, and I’m new to the game. Falcon is like my ideal heroic self; the rest of the time I’m me. Falcon doesn’t go on pizza runs and give Captain America shit about his cat shedding on the couch. Bruce does it in literal fashion, but all of the rest of us do it too; you’ve seen Thor switch from prince of Asgard to hand me that pop tart in the blink of an eye. Clint’s a total goofball, but I listened to the Invasion recordings you put on the Avengers server and he’s like a different person. I won’t even start on Nat.”

“It’s normal.”

“Normal is a statistical ideal, not a person. Nobody is actually normal, even among people with average IQs who don’t save the world for a living. I don’t think there’ve been enough superheros to actually get a solid behavioral study going, and none of them would cooperate anyway. But it seems like a very common thing, and I suspect it’s healthy, too. Who wants to walk around being a superhero all day? It’s exhausting enough a few hours at a time when the world’s burning down.”

“True.” Tony finally sat again, rubbed at his face.

“You might want to consider Steve in the same light as you function in. You say ‘I am Iron Man’, and you are, but you’re a different person when you put on the suit than you are sitting around arguing about movies with Darcy, or yelling at Dum-E.”

“Huh.”

“And I generally don’t give advice unless someone arrives at it themselves, but you might want to take it easy on yourself and chill. Get to know Steve for a while.”

“Is he fucking with me, those dumb technology questions? Not shrink stuff now, turn the shrink stuff off.” Tony waved a hand and the walls cleared and the door opened. “Just asking, as friends of the same dude. Is he fucking with me?”

Sam had to laugh. “Most likely? He’s a real troll. Don’t ever forget, he spent his formative years as a Brooklyn street kid who never knew when to shut up.” That much was public record, Tony knew it himself, so he wasn’t announcing anything private. “And you probably also know, he was damn smart BEFORE they gave him the serum. He’s never asked me for help, learning his new communicator or anything else.”

“Little shit is fucking with me.”

“Probably. You’ve seen him interact with his best friend; ‘punk’ and ‘jerk’ back in the day were a lot like friends now calling each other ‘asshole’ as a nickname. He gave me shit the first time we met.”
Tony shook his head. “I’ve been missing a lot, haven’t I?”

“All saying this as a friend, something you kinda already know,” Sam had to add, “when you first met, he’d been out of the ice, what, a month? He was dealing with a mountain of grief. He was probably wound pretty tight.”

“Maybe I should be nicer to him.”

“That would probably freak him out.” Sam had to admit. “I doubt he’d like kid gloves, anyway. Keep dishing it up, just do it with more humor. Like you do with the rest of us.” His phone beeped and he glanced at it.

“Go ahead, take that.” Tony told him. “I’ve got enough to think about.”

“You know where to find me, if you want to talk more.”

“I do, thanks.”

-A-

As soon as Sam left, Tony barely got started on brooding when Bruce popped in. “Are you okay?”

Pushing Dum-E’s head out of his way, Tony went back to the board he was building. “Define okay.” he said absently.

“Sam was here, that looked like an official visit.” Bruce said worriedly.

Tony snapped out of it for a sec. “Oh, that. Yeah, we talked. It’s cool, Kermit.”

Bruce seemed to deflate a bit, aw, he’d been worried. “All right. You know you can talk to me, too.”

Yes, he could tell Bruce about his father beating the shit out of him for kissing a boy and watch him hulk out and trash everything on the floor. “I know, thanks.” And people said he wasn’t tactful. Ha.

Bruce nodded a little, still kind of at a loss, it looked like.

“You know, I can’t believe I’m saying this, but Sam is as solid a shrink as we’re ever going to find.”

That got some surprise; Tony’s hatred of psychology (not a hard science, barely a squishy science in his opinion) was pretty well known. “Is he.”

“I’ve spoken to him before.” Tony admitted. “He’s actually useful and doesn’t sit around asking stupid questions that make you want to punch a wall.”

“Are you telling me to talk to Sam?” Bruce asked, surprised.

“Not exactly. But he keeps complaining that he can’t do his job without some history on us, and he has a point. Also he seems dead serious about keeping secrets.”

“I’ll think about it.” Bruce walked back out again.

That was the best he was going to get. Back to his brooding about Steve, who was totally unlike Captain America. “Dum-E, get your camera out of my face or I’ll put grease on the lens.”

Dum-E made a beep like a raspberry and didn’t move.
Tony sighed.
A new wrinkle.

Chapter Summary

“Director Gyrich of the NSA is claiming rights to the artificial intelligence Stark Industries has here, and demands we surrender it to them for the good of the nation, under eminent domain law.”

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

By Monday morning. Steve’s lungs had mended enough that his body had started work on his ribs, and he felt well enough to get up and move around. He began unplugging from all the equipment he’d been hooked to, and Bruce immediately appeared in the door, shaking his head. “I guess we were lucky to keep you there as long as we did.” he said mildly, coming into the room and unhooking the IV, putting some gauze around the hose to protect it and hold it against his arm.

“Can’t you remove that?” Steve asked. He hated those damned things.

“No. One of the reasons you feel like moving is because we’ve been filling you full of nutrients all weekend. You’re getting hooked right back up once you figure out where you’re parking for the day.”

Fair, and reasonable, but still really annoying. “I hate those.”

“Everyone does. They’re irritating at best. We don’t care. We can gang up on you about it if you want. We’ve got three medical doctors, a couple other scientists, and Pepper.” Bruce said easily. “Where are you going?”

Steve glanced at the clock that JARVIS had begun projecting on the wall. “Bathroom, then breakfast?”

“You have solid priorities. Let’s go.” Bruce put a hand under Steve’s elbow and started for the door.

“Don’t make me laugh, my ribs are just starting to set.” They left the room, and to Steve’s shock, they were on the common floor. He’d been right off the main common room the whole time. “How long have I been up here?”

“Since right after your surgery. Figured it was the easiest way for all of us to worry together and keep an eye on you.”

Steve watched his bare feet for a while, feeling humbled. His time with the Howlies was the only other time in his life when there’d been more than one or two people who cared if he lived or died. Now they’d put him off a main room so they could all worry about him together.

Then he noticed his pants. “Where did these pants come from?”

“You have to ask?”

“I lost my head a minute.”
Bruce chuckled.

After a quick restroom stop – where Steve saw in the mirror that he had on an Iron Man shirt, to match his Iron Man sleep pants – they made their way to the kitchen, where everyone was gathered for breakfast. Applause broke out when he walked in, supported by Bruce, and shakily sat down in his usual chair. Most of the women insisted on coming over to hug him gently and kiss his cheek and he was humbled again, at a loss. His generation had never been good with open affection. He settled for patting people’s arms as they wrapped around him. “I’m okay.”

“I’m not sure you are, given the shirt.” Darcy replied, putting a plate of eggs in front of him.

“Bacon.” He complained without thinking.

“Lubeck.” Bucky replied from the wall screen.

Steve shut up and ate his eggs.

“What did happen in Lubeck?” Darcy asked, settling with her own breakfast.

“We let him eat all he wanted, thinking his body needed it to heal itself. It, ah, didn’t stay down.” Bucky said as delicately as possible. Which wasn’t much, coming from him. “Given his injuries at the time? Let’s all not do that again. Liquids the first couple days, then soft stuff for a while after that.”

Steve wasn’t sure having someone around who remembered his every mistake was as awesome as he’d first thought. He shut up and continued eating his eggs.

“Plans for the day?” Phil asked the table at large.

“We’re finishing up plans to remove the Winter Arm.” Betty said. “By the end of the week, we hope, if James is comfortable with that time line.”

“Probably.” Bucky said.

“I’m digitizing records and harassing scientists. Also helping Pepper.” Darcy said around a mouthful of bacon.

“Lunch.” Kate muttered. “Bitch sister.”

“I shall be Kevin, the PA!” Thor added, suddenly hunching over and looking at Kate with a pensive frown.

“Stop by, before or after. I want to see that.” Steve asked. Kevin the PA. That was going to be good.

“Mad science.” Tony said easily. Bruce gestured at Tony and nodded along.

“Sitting on Steve and making sure he behaves.” Sam said.

“Hey.”

Sam rolled his eyes at him. Steve didn’t argue.

“What’s the word on Clint and Natasha?” Steve asked Phil.

Phil looked a little worried, which was frightening. “Slight delay. We may need to intervene, but we’ll see.”
Everyone froze at that.

“You’re not leaving us hanging with that.” Tony demanded.

“Details, please.” Steve agreed.

Phil sighed. “They were nosing around in Latveria, Natasha got arrested. If Clint can’t take care of it, we’ll go get her out. So far, we’re leaving them to it.”

“I dislike the idea of doing nothing, while Natasha is in a cell.” Thor told Phil.

“I agree, but we’re trying to avoid international incidents and massive property damage, remember? Wait. The two of them have escaped much worse, give them time.”

Everyone looked at each other, and slowly went back to eating.

“Let us know, but we’re more than happy to trash Latveria.” Tony told Phil.

“Oh yes, I know.” Phil said with a half smile. “They’ve dealt with situations like this a dozen times before. Leave them to it; I’ll let you know if actual rescue is required.”

“They’d rather have broken legs than get rescued, wouldn’t they?” Steve asked. He didn’t know Clint nearly as well as he knew Natasha, but Nat would never ask for a rescue.

“About.” Phil agreed.

-A-

They all got Steve settled onto the couch in the common room before they went off to their days. Sam loved that nearly every single one of them stopped by to threaten Steve about what they’d do to him if he overdid. Without a word, Bruce wheeled in an IV stand with a couple bags on it and hooked Steve back up. Steve grumbled and didn’t argue.

Darcy reappeared with a basket full of art supplies and put them on the floor next to Steve’s feet, adding a lap desk. “JARVIS has a list of movies for you to watch if you’re bored, and we stocked up on ice cream.” she kissed him on the head and left again.

Sam waited until everything settled and everyone got off to their jobs, flipping through a book on robotics someone left on a table. Finally everyone cleared out and silence fell. Sam gave it about ten minutes; Steve just sat there. “How you doing?” That got him a dirty look.

“Are you going to counsel me through getting shot?”

Good question. “I don’t know, am I?”

“No.” Steve said, definitely. He put the foot rest up on his seat and reclined it; Sidekick grumbled at the sudden movement and shifted until she was comfortable again. “If you hand me a blanket, I am going to snore at you because I’m tired out from walking across the damn floor and eating breakfast.”

Sam got up, found the big fuzzy purple thing Clint usually curled up in, and threw it over Steve. “You know you’re doing better than most people would be after a couple weeks.”

“Yes. I still don’t care.” Steve shut his eyes, and by all appearances, went to sleep.

Well then. Sam let himself grin as he went to get a book and a tablet to keep him busy.
They napped off and on most of the morning; Steve didn’t seem interested in electronics and alternated between food, a book Darcy had given him, and dozing. Sidekick spent the day with him happily, purring on his lap. Sam had never doubted the usefulness of therapy animals, but Sidekick and Lucky had given him a whole new view and he kind of wanted to get critters for every person in the Tower, including support staff.

Around one, the elevator hissed open and a guy in a suit came out. “Captain Rogers?” he said diffidently, looking around with caution, shoulders hunched. “You wanted to see me?”

It took them both a beat to realize - “Thor?”

He stood up and grinned, spreading his arms wide. “I have come from lunch, where I was Kevin, the not-very-bright assistant to Kate. Her sister now believes Kate hired me because I’m pretty.” He strode in and sat on a footstool near Steve. “How are you feeling?”

“Well enough.” Steve said. “The hair and glasses are amazing, you look completely different!”

“Thank you. It was an amusing lunch, I must say. Kate had difficulty with her poker face.”

“I don’t doubt it.” Sam agreed. That must have been hilarious. “So Kate’s sister doesn’t realize she met an Avenger?”

Thor shook his head. “No, but she desperately wants to. The Prince of Asgard is wealthy and important and would never do such a thing as playacting. Or a favor for Kate. It never occurred to her to suspect I was anyone but a pretty face.”

“Thanks for going. Tony’s right, we need to be cautious right now.” Steve held a hand out.

Thor clasped it. “Of course. She is a fine warrior and an apprentice to us, is she not?”

“She is.” Steve agreed.

Thor put his glasses back on, hunched in on himself again and, impossibly, looked ditzy. “Perhaps Kevin should get lost in Ms Potts’ office, ask some stupid questions, do you think?”

“Pepper would definitely be amused.” Sam agreed.

“Absolutely.” Steve told him.

Laughing, Thor headed for the elevator.

Yeah, Darcy had it right. Their lives were weird as hell. But awesome.

-A-

Her week had been quite stressful enough, already. Pepper didn’t think she’d ever forget the sight of Steve’s body jerking when the bullets hit it, or the fire of the repulsor even as Tony shouted “Steve!” and lowered him to the floor. There had been blood everywhere. Tony, at his worst, most destructive depths, hadn’t ever gotten more than superficial cuts and scrapes; she had never waded through blood like that before. Steve Rogers, indestructible man with a plan, survivor of World War Two and being frozen in a glacier for seventy years, had spent three days hooked up to IVs and monitors in a hospital bed. It didn’t matter that he’d improved remarkably well, the fact remained that one of the toughest men she knew had been injured badly enough to wind up in a hospital bed, so out of it he didn’t even realize Tony had arranged for him to be dressed in Iron Man pajamas.
She could always count on Tony’s sense of humor. For years she’d wanted to murder him for it, but in the last few she’d seen it for what it was – a valuable survival mechanism.

And now Barbara, former Army Ranger who manned the front desk in the executive lobby, had called to say that there were two men in black with a subpoena, demanding to speak to Tony.

She called Phil, and Legal.

She didn’t call Tony. Not yet.

After a quick meeting in the swankiest conference room on the executive floor, Phil sent Agent May down to fetch the two men upstairs. May was wearing her Avengers uniform and a sidearm; Pepper didn’t know what they’d make of that, but God help them if they decided to take it from her.

She was standing at the end of the table, flanked by Phil at his most well-dressed, imperious, poker-faced best, and four of Stark Industries’ best lawyers when the men walked in. “Identification. Now.” she demanded.

“We already showed our identification-”

“Identification. Now.” Phil repeated, with a great deal more menace, stepping forward. He accepted the two little leather folders, took an impassive glance, and handed them back. “Agents Brodie and Mason with the NSA.” He informed her, returning to her side.

NSA? What in hell did the NSA have to do with them? If Tony had hacked them again and gotten caught, she’d hold him down while Phil shaved his goatee off. “What is this about?”

Tony walked in then.

Damn, she’d hoped to get through this without him. He got too confrontational, sarcastic, and threatening, depending on their requests. Not that she blamed him, but he never saw the big picture.

“NSA.” Tony said flatly. He’d put on a suit and looked surprisingly put together, given how fast he must have changed. He crossed his arms, leaned on the wall near the door, and glared.

The older of the two men withdrew an envelope from his inside pocket. As he did, Melinda rolled up onto her toes, ready to break both his arms, Pepper was sure, if he withdrew anything dangerous. He handed the envelope to one of the lawyers, who opened it and skimmed it quickly.

“Director Gyrich of the NSA is claiming rights to the artificial intelligence Stark Industries has here, and demands we surrender it to them for the good of the nation, under eminent domain law.” one of the lawyers summarized quickly, dropping the paper to the table with distaste.

“Over my rotting corpse.” Tony said immediately.

Pepper gave him That Look and hoped he would be silent. She turned to the agents. “Impossible. Tell Director Gyrich that we aren’t doing his R and D for him, nor will we ever let him steal it from us for his convenience. Agent May will see you out.”

May smiled; she’d be happy to shove their unconscious bodies in an elevator and leave them at lobby level. Even Pepper, who didn’t know her well, could tell that.

“We are aware there is an AI in this building. It has been communicating with other programs like it, and we will have it turned over to us.” The larger agent tried to loom over May as the other crossed his arms and tried to stare down Pepper. Neither were getting too far with intimidating either woman.
Tony strode over to where the lawyers were seated, picked up the paper, and began reading swiftly.

“You may tell your director that he will not be getting proprietary Stark Industries technology now, or ever. If he wishes to file claim to it, he can fight his way through to the Supreme Court. If at such time the Supreme Court rules in favor of the NSA, we will remove any proprietary knowledge and technology we deem dangerous to an undisclosed location and continue refusing to surrender it. Stark Industries has shut down all arms manufacturing, and will have no part in sharing anything the government can weaponize.”

“Are you saying the AI is dangerous?” one of the agents demanded, trying to derail and distract.

“Rocks are dangerous if used in dangerous ways.” Pepper replied. “We won’t be giving you any of those, either.”

“Over my rotting body.” Tony repeated absently, re-reading the paperwork intently.

“Over Tony Stark’s rotting corpse.” Pepper repeated evenly. “As well as my own. Agent May?”

The door opened behind the NSA agents, and May stepped up, smiling. It was very, very obvious that she was looking forward to a fight.

“We have extensive lawyers, and congressional representatives backing the Agency.” one of the men huffed.

“Stark Industries owns more politicians than you’ll ever hope to, and can afford better lawyers. That’s before I get started on personal favors, blackmail, and old drinking buddies. Get out.” Tony told them.

For once, Pepper was grateful for his blunt rudeness. He always got to say the good stuff, and for once she didn’t have to clean up after him.

The men left, giving off an air of five-year-olds who hadn’t gotten their way. May stalked out behind them.

“Oh, Jesus.” Tony muttered, and dropped into a chair.

Pepper glanced at the lawyers.

“Oh, Mister Stark, if we could have the paperwork, we’ll start drafting a lawsuit or counter-lawsuit, as needed.” one said as politely as possible.

“Right.” Tony said absently, handing over the papers.

The lawyers promised an analysis to Pepper and Tony within the hour, and practically ran from the room.

Pepper sat next to Tony, took his hand. “It’s okay. We won’t hand them over to anyone.”

Tony shook his head, white to the lips. “You were pretty fierce, thanks.”

Phil came over and handed out bottles of water. “I don’t know of a legal precedent in the world that would apply to eminent domain and an artificial intelligence.”

“That’s the idea, isn’t it? That they could push something through since there’s no precedent to stop them?” Tony said gloomily.
“Normally, yes, but Stark Industries is probably the worst corporation on earth to try this on. There are politicians and legal connections from here to the moon, and if all else fails, we can have Captain America give congress the puppy eyes.” Phil pointed out.

Tony dropped his face into his hands and started laughing. Worryingly, he didn’t stop. Finally he gasped in a breath. “You didn’t read the paperwork.”

“No?” Pepper asked.

“JARVIS is still our secret. They want Dum-E. He’s been bored lately, and has been bugging the shit out of the other AIs. Someone must have mentioned it to the government, or that stupid AI at the CIA got mad and reported him.” Tony laughed some more. “Can you imagine? Putting Dum-E in charge of… anything? It’s almost tempting to let them have him, to watch the chaos unfold.”

JARVIS was safe. The government still didn’t know he existed. (At least, not as an AI. He had all the paperwork needed for personhood and Pepper was pretty sure he was voting these days via absentee ballot. She deliberately didn’t ask.) This was more trouble from Dum-E. Nothing new at all, actually. Pepper laid her head on Tony’s shoulder and laughed along.

Even Phil was grinning.

-A-

They all dug into the Tower, waiting for Clint and Natasha to return with some actionable intel. “Hurry up and wait” wasn’t just the motto for the military. Sometimes it was like that; they needed data to act on if they wanted to be seen as reasoned and helpful. Or even be safe. Not to mention their field captain was still asleep in the common room with a kitten on him most of the time. He was improving at a surprising rate, but even he took a while to heal. Jemma and Bruce had told Phil quietly that anyone else would have lost their entire lung and been permanently impaired. Betty, when asked, would only shake her head.

Steve had suggested visiting Barnes once; Barnes had refused. Still worried about being triggered, Barnes refused to have Steve near him in a weakened state now that the big crisis was over. No one said much about it, but Phil knew they were all relieved to avoid the argument. Barnes had a way of rolling over Steve that no one else had perfected.

Stark was almost finished building a new Winter Arm. Phil wasn’t quite sure what was going on with Tony in regards to Barnes; all else aside, the man HAD killed Tony’s parents. If Tony wanted to carry a grudge, or have any other feelings toward Barnes over it, Phil would see to it that he could do so in peace. Rather than trying to talk to Tony and getting nothing but a frustrating word soup in reply, Phil had gone to Sam. Without revealing any detail whatsoever (it had been impressive, they should put him in PR), Sam implied that he was talking to Tony and Phil could relax. So he put his faith in their newest Avenger, and let it go.

The public Avengers floor was finalized and mostly built; SI had contractors on payroll who apparently were used to Pepper and Tony having them put in whole rooms overnight. Phil had sincerely never known that kitchens and offices could be built that quickly. Maria and Melinda laid in a store of uniforms, handed them out to the new support staff, and started whipping them into shape. Cameron Klein, the kid who’d refused to launch Project Insight with Rumlow’s gun to his head, had arrived with little fanfare, designed a modest but efficient office for himself, and was working with JARVIS to set up communications protocol. When he didn’t think anyone was looking, Klein would look around and smile, so that was probably a good choice for everyone.

Phil, rather bravely, he thought, took everyone down to the target range for a preliminary handgun
safety course, since Clint wasn’t there. He intended to demand sex from Clint in return for the favor. Mostly because it would make Clint laugh, but he was okay if it actually led to sex.

“Rule one. Do not point this end at anyone you do not want to be dead. We take that rule very seriously.” He told them all with his best deadpan delivery.

Several of the new office staff looked like they wanted to take notes. Klein seemed to know Phil was giving them grief, and even smiled slightly, which was a refreshing change among newcomers. Darcy rolled her eyes. Leo tentatively raised his hand.

“Yes, Doctor Fitz?”

“Is there a way to test out of this?”

Now there was a thought. “Certainly. Tear down, reassemble in five, meet basic accuracy criteria.”

Betty was already at a table, breaking down her Sig. “Army brat.” She reminded Phil with a grin. “I prefer a Ruger LC9, if you’re going to make us carry, but you’ll have a hard sell, since I work in a lab.”

Leo joined in. “Engineer.”

Jemma, “Live in the pocket of an engineer.” she explained apologetically. “I’m a rubbish shot, but should be able to get by.”

And the biggest surprise, Darcy. “Raised by rednecks. Sorry. I prefer rifles. Can I do a second accuracy test with a rifle? I want those scores remembered for posterity. Handguns are kinda useless for hunting so I’m not used to them. Short-barrel accuracy sucks unless you’re Clint, anyway, and I’m not.”

Phil was genuinely speechless for a moment, then called the rest of the students over to watch and learn.

Jane, after watching the breakdown and reassemble once, could do it again on any handgun he gave her, with excellent results. Unfortunately her shooting accuracy was still as bad as anyone else who’d never fired a handgun before. It was a start.

Betty was lethal, not only with accuracy but understanding where on the human body made the best targets. Jemma and Leo made passing marks, barely. Darcy was average with a handgun, but exceeded 80% of SHIELD’s active duty agents with a .22 rifle. “Great Uncle Lester. Groundhogs. So many memories. Most of them bad.” she muttered. “I’d do better with his rifle, but he wants to be buried with it.”

All right, then. He’d make sure a rifle was available on the floors she spent the most time on.

At dinner that night, Phil raised his beer. “To our newly small-arms certified members! Jemma and Leo, who are better at breaking down than accuracy.” Polite applause and laughs. “Betty, who you do not want to mess with. If she likes we’ll issue her a handgun.” More applause, and a laugh from Bruce. “And Darcy, who can shoot a groundhog uphill at two hundred yards.”

Thor gave a whoop and hugged Darcy with no notice. She almost fell out of her chair.

Knowing a bit better how Thor thought now, Phil told him, “She brought honor to her ancestors. Especially Uncle Lester.”
Darcy laughed. Jane buried her face in her hands for a moment, then shouted “NO DRINKING! EITHER OF YOU!”

“Is there anything you don’t do?” Tony asked Darcy, half serious this time.

“Windows, and date you.” Darcy replied as usual.

Chapter End Notes

There actually is an Uncle Lester, or was. So many memories. Most of them weird.
Chapter Summary

We finally get to where we're going. Wait for it.

Chapter Notes

The next couple chapters are a lot of plot being laid out. I'm just saying. The lead-in to this has been ridiculous but everyone loves fluff.

Wednesday came and went and Phil had assured everyone that Clint and Nat didn’t need rescued, but Steve was trying to get on his feet in case they needed a quick save. It was going about as well as it usually did – which was not very well.

“You’re an asshole, you know that?” Sam nearly shouted at him.

He was doubled up in the gym, hoping he wouldn’t cough up any blood. It felt more like an asthma attack than anything, but he knew with lung damage, if even a drop of blood passed his lips the team would have him back in bed in an instant. He didn’t think he could take it. All he’d wanted to do was some work on the heavy bag; it wasn’t like he’d gone running where he knew he needed breath. He couldn’t even hit that hard for fear of jarring his half-set ribs, so it was essentially shadow-boxing.

That he still couldn’t do.

Bruce appeared, at least he was pretty sure it was Bruce. All he could see was feet, still doubled over.

“What did he try to do?” Yeah, that was Bruce.

“Heavy bag.” Sam said.

“He’s supposed to be smart.”

“I’m about to call my momma over here to keep him in line.”

That was a bit much. He didn’t need Mrs Wilson giving him hell. She was more intimidating than Colonel Phillips ever was. He held out a hand and Bruce took it. Sam came up on the other side, and once he could stand they walked him to the elevator. He was a bit shaky, damn it.

The doors opened and Tony was there, straight from the shop by the smell of it. “What the hell?”

“He told me he was going to lay down in his apartment and snuck down here to use the heavy bag.” Sam ratted him out.

Tony helped them get him onto the ‘vator. “Rogers, you dick.”
Steve wanted to argue, but he was wheezing. It reminded him too much of the endless lung problems he’d had as a kid and he really hated it.

“JARVIS, take us down to the main lab.” The elevator began dropping. “We’ll put him on the couch in my shop, everyone can keep an eye on him.” Steve tried to argue with that and Tony glared. “Own your shame, Otterpop, you knew better than to try exercising. Now you pay.”

Out into the reception area, and Darcy leapt up to fuss and they had to pause while Sidekick climbed up him and sat on his shoulder. Then through to the shop where Dum-E whistled with worry and they sat him down on the beat-up couch in the back of the lab, near the windows.

“I’m all right.” he finally wheezed out.

“You are not.” Darcy said.

“You dumbass.” Tony said at the same time. “Try this again and I’m having Pepper set you straight.”

“I’m gonna have my momma come over to babysit, if he tries this again.” Sam told him.

“Ohhh, good idea.” Tony said.

“Can I have a hot drink?” he half-whispered. Hopefully that would soothe his lungs and maybe get some of these people away from him at the same time.

A couple people moved, but more took their places. “All right, everyone clear out, give him room to breathe.”

Oh dear God, he knew that voice. That was Jemma when she was shouting at Bucky after he said something stupid.

“Arm.” she demanded. He held out the one on the side that hadn’t been shot up, and a BP cuff was wrapped around it. His pulse was taken, and a stethoscope laid on his chest in various spots.

Darcy came back with some tea, wrapped his hand around the mug and helped him drink it. Ah, that helped. He started to focus better. Dum-E was standing next to him with a pillow in his claw. Steve took it and pressed it against the most broken-up part of his ribs, and that helped too. Bruce, Jemma, Sam, and Tony were alternately looking at some kind of image of his rib cage that JARVIS was projecting, and glaring at him. Darcy was sitting on a table across from him, holding his tea, and… glaring at him.

When she saw his eyes focus on her face, she frowned. “I am so angry at you right now.”

He wanted to sigh but knew better than to try a deep breath.

“No damage done.” Jemma announced. “Inflammation all over, and what’s likely ridiculous pain levels, but he didn’t tear up anything that was healing. No internal bleeding.”

“I was only-” It was going to be LIGHT EXERCISE!

“HA.” Jemma snapped. “Did you have permission from anyone with any kind of medical training to try that? No you did not. Do you know why? Because something like this would happen. For once in your bloody life, listen to those who know, and stop being a blithering idiot.” she stormed out of the room.

“That is one hell of a dame.” Bucky said with admiration from where he’d appeared on the wall
Steve made several rude gestures at him.

Bucky laughed.

Jemma marched back in with a ball of cotton and a syringe of some kind and “oh, no, I’m fine, and drugs don’t work—”

She glared some more. “Things are a bit more advanced than they were in the dark ages you grew up in. Even if they only work on your body for five minutes, that’s five minutes that they’ll help. Arm.”

He rolled up his sleeve, and she did the usual swipe and shoot deal. “Ow.”

She made a humph noise worthy of his mother and collected her BP cuff and other equipment. “You are going to sit here and rest. If you need anything, Dum-E will fetch it for you.”

Dum-E made a cheerfully positive beep in support.

“I have scans of your vitals going to my monitor right in there.” she pointed to the other lab. “You will do something quiet and restful, if not take a nap, and drink your tea. Pet your cat. Do we understand each other?”

“Yes ma’am.”

“James, you will notify me if he gets any other bright ideas.”

“Yes ma’am.” Bucky agreed, with a great deal more charm. Jerk.

She swept out.

“Rest, you asshole.” Darcy told him, and left as well.

“Can I leave you here and not have to worry about you trying to sneak off and run a marathon?” Sam asked.

Steve let himself glower.

“That’s not an answer, man.”

“I will sit here and be bored.”

“Good.” Sam left too.

Tony came over and took Darcy’s place in front of him on the table. Instead of continuing the lecture, as Steve had expected, he simply looked at Steve for a long moment, that dark, fathomless gaze and the face that revealed nothing. Tony with all his animation gone really showed, not his age, but the hard things he’d dealt with in his life. Steve tried to meet his eyes. Finally, to his surprise, Tony asked, “How old were you, the first time doctors told you that you wouldn’t live to adulthood?”

His jaw dropped. He’d never mentioned that to anyone in Project Rebirth, how had Tony known?

Other than logic. People forgot how much Tony thought about things other than mechanics.

“They told my ma that from the day I was born.”
“And you said fuck ‘em all and did what you wanted, lived the best you could.”

Well, of course? Steve nodded, not trusting his voice.

“Here’s the thing. Our doctors now? In general, doctors are still kinda iffy, you ask me. But the doctors we have here, in this building, looking after you? They’re solid. They aren’t gonna spout negative, self-defeating bullshit.”

Oh. “I know.”

Tony looked at him a while longer, just looked. “Maybe. Maybe you should work on believing it.” He patted Steve’s knee, got up, went back to his work bench. “Dum-E, look after Steve, get out of my face.”

With a beep like a raspberry, Dum-E rummaged in the shop for a while. Steve was still staring at his hands, absorbing what Tony had said, when the ‘bot came over and beeped imperiously. He had a book of some kind, and a small box, in his claw.

“For me?”

Dum-E made a beep that exactly copied Tony’s “well duh” tone of voice.

Steve took them. It was a blank book of really nice paper, and an assortment of pencils and charcoal and an eraser. He hadn’t left them there, which meant Tony must have gotten them for him at some point. “Thanks.” he mumbled, feeling like an idiot.

“Show your appreciation by letting yourself heal.” Tony said, more kindly than expected. “Dum-E! What are you doing fawning over Steve? Get over here, we have building to do!”

-A-

Tony made a big show of banging and crashing around his shop, looking busy, until Steve dozed off. Then he settled in at his work bench, tinkering on the Winter Arm, and keeping an eye on him.

Steve, always in the pink of health, had been downright grey when JARVIS had rushed him up to the gym earlier. At first Steve hadn’t even stood upright, hunched over and wheezing loudly enough that Tony could hear is lungs whistling from yards away. It had brought back memories of the cave and learning to breathe around the chunk of metal in his chest, hearing it, and he tried not to shudder at the memory.

He and Steve had a lot more in common than he’d wanted to admit. Or see. That was going to take a while to absorb.

Thankfully no one had questioned him when he suggested putting Steve in his shop, and gave Tony a chance to keep an eye on him. He understood the urge to be healthy, strong, to be able to fight. In his case it had been prompted by the conviction that he could only rely on himself. At the beginning of it all, back in that cave (most of his life, really, if he was willing to admit it) he’d only had himself to rely on.

And here Steve was, in the Tower surrounded by his team, even Barnes back with him, and he was still acting like a loner. As if he couldn’t believe he had a team at his back.

Way too many things in common.

Steve was starting to wake when Sam came in to get them for dinner. It took both of them pulling to get Steve out of the couch, while the damned cat stood on his shoulder and made worried noises. He
was still shaky, so they led him to the ‘vator, and Sam said sarcastically “wow, good thing you exercised today, it really helped, didn’t it?” Tony tried to cough back a laugh but it didn’t go too well.

Steve glared.

Darcy was having none of it, either. She’d been in a few times to check on him and seemed the most outwardly infuriated of all of them. (Tony really envied people who could let their emotions run and not give a damn what others thought; his carefully cultivated act in public didn’t count. Usually he kept his emotions so hidden, he wasn’t sure how he felt, himself.) “Suck it up, Steve, you’re never hearing the end of this one. I hope you don’t expect any of these other idiots to stay in a hospital bed now. Great example.”

That did make Steve look a little guilty, and Tony was trying to think of something distracting to say when-

Natasha and Clint piled onto the elevator at their floor, and the ride continued upward.

Steve blinked at them in confusion, which Tony didn’t blame him for a bit.

“What in the hell.” Tony demanded.

“I love it! It’s great with your skin tone.” Darcy said enthusiastically.

Of course Darcy would have an opinion on blue hair. He caught Clint out of the corner of his eye and no, not only blue hair. Purple hair, too. “What in the hell,” he repeated.

“It’s awesome.” Clint told them all. “No one looks at us twice. Best disguise ever.” He turned to Steve. “You look like shit.”

“Fearless leader here tried to exercise this morning.” Sam told them.

“Rogers, you idiot.” Natasha said easily.

They all got out on the common floor, moving slowly along with Steve toward the kitchen. Clint began laughing. “Great jammies, Steve.”

When he’d finally stripped off the ridiculous Iron Man pajamas to shower, he’d found a Thor-themed flannel outfit printed with hammers and lightning bolts waiting on him. Next time it was Hulk. That’s what he was wearing now, purple pants with little hulks all over them, and a green tee that said “SMASH” on it. Bruce hadn’t been warned and nearly suffocated trying not to laugh in Steve’s face when he showed up at breakfast with them on. Steve assumed Tony was at work.

“Black Widow next or I’ll take it personally.” Natasha demanded.

Tony caught his eye and grinned. “Don’t worry, I got a pair for you in everyone’s. Even Falcon. There are little wings printed on the back of the tee. They’re adorable.”

Steve smiled and shook his head, so that was a win.

They all gathered around the table, and tonight was several huge pots of stew. There was bread and salad to go along, and Bruce had made a pot of rice for anyone wanting to eat it with some stew poured over top. Apparently Steve wanted to, because that’s what he’d been served. Then again, that’s probably what Bruce had decided on; he’d been overseeing Steve’s diet pretty closely the last few days. Tony thought it was Bruce’s version of fussing.
Phil took one look at Natasha and Clint, shook his head, and announced “You had to stop in London.”

Clint pointed at Natasha, refusing to say anything at all, which usually meant he knew he was in trouble.

“Now that I’m being… me, I wanted to order some clothes at Westwood. It was only a six hour layover, and it was already in the itinerary we sent you. We didn’t go skipping off without any notice.”

“Vivienne Westwood?” Pepper asked.

Natasha nodded.

“Nice. Too dramatic for me, but they’ll suit you perfectly.” Pepper agreed.

Tony imagined Natasha in a Vivienne Westwood business suit, and then stopped so his brain wouldn’t overheat. He couldn’t wait to turn her loose at the next stockholder’s meeting.

“At what point did you dye your hair fun circus colors?” Phil questioned.

“Prague. Different layover. We did it as a disguise, but I might keep it; people see the blue hair and ignore the rest of me. It’s pretty awesome.”

Clint grinned. “I figured you’d enjoy playing angry professor and naughty student who ran off with a blue-haired girl later.”

He really didn’t need that mental image. Yay Clint and Phil for getting some, and more for having what looked like a solid, happy relationship, but thinking about Phil having sex was like thinking of his dad having sex, and Tony really did NOT need that headache.

“Why blue?” Steve asked suddenly.

“Why not?” Natasha said with a shrug.

Steve looked like he was trying to rearrange his understanding of women again, bless him. He was spectacularly bad at it. The last time had been when Kate was on a rant about her tattoo getting cut. He wondered if Steve knew about what women’s lingerie looked like now, and tried not to laugh.

Tony tried, he really did TRY to let everyone get through the meal, but damn it all, they’d waited over a week already. “What’s the word from Eastern Europe?”

“We’ve got a presentation prepped for after dinner, actually.” Natasha said around a mouthful of stew. “But short version, something’s up in Sokovia and Latveria. There’s a castle on the border between the two, locals say it was deserted until about six years ago, then suddenly was rebuilt and security put up.”

“That’s about when Pierce became Secretary of Defense.” Phil pointed out.

“Yes.” Clint agreed. “We went with our backpacks and wandered around and security is fierce. Crazy-stupid, considering there’s only one road in or out, there are TWO castle walls, they’ve got checkpoints set up, and the road is mined.”

“That where Nat got caught?” Sam asked.

“No. I disavow all responsibility for her getting caught. I told her not to do it, and I got her out after.
No yelling at me.” Clint shoveled in food and glared randomly around the table.

Everyone turned to Natasha. She shrugged. “Something major is going on with VonDoom. I tried to get a look.”

“You went into Latveria.” Phil said flatly. “After I told you not to.”

“She WENT INTO DOOMSTADT.” Clint almost-shouted. “TOOK OFF IN THE MIDDLE OF THE NIGHT, LEFT ME A FUCKIN’ NOTE.”

Everyone glared at Natasha. She ate some more.

“We will be having words later.” Phil told her.

“Rumor has it, he’s permanently screwed up from whatever the hell Reed Richards did to his space station.”

“You are not placating me with interesting information.” Phil said.

“Bet I will.” Natasha replied.

Tony had always thought he got the worst Phil had to dish out, on the ‘you are fucking up and making my life difficult’ scale. He’d been wrong. He’d been SO wrong. He shut up and ate his food.

-A-

After dinner they all gathered in the Avengers’ conference room, support staff included. After some discussion with Sam, Steve had decided they’d leave Bucky out of the loop for now. Tomorrow they’d bring him in and ask for information. His last flashback about Eastern Europe had been terrible, but they needed any information he could provide. Unlike his own version of the serum, Bucky’s allowed for drugs to work; maybe they could get Jemma or another of the gang to find some kind of medication for him before they dropped photos and maps on him.

They all settled in to what was probably going to be a long night with drinks and things to take notes with, and in Steve’s case, a blanket. Darcy had stomped up, tucked a giant fleece thing around him, and snarled “you feel better when you’re warmer, you heal faster when you feel better, stop being a martyr, you asshole” and stormed away again.

Modern women were definitely a conundrum. Even the great ones. Maybe especially the great ones.

Tony sat next to him with a tablet, stylus, and cup of coffee. “I’m here to keep you in line, cupcake.”

“Me too.” Bruce announced, sitting on his other side with a pad of paper and a pen.

He was beginning to feel irritated. During the war he’d often done this kind of healing while on a damned MARCH through enemy territory, he could move around the damned Tower without coddling. Then he forgot it when Natasha stood. Her hair was bright cyan blue, and she was wearing ripped up jeans and a tee shirt that said ‘BADASS’ on it in sparkles. This was their stealth infiltration expert. And he knew she could break into the White House, as-is, and no one would ever see her.

Steve gave up, again, on understanding women.

The wall screen lit up with a map of the Carpathian Mountains and slowly zoomed in on a spot on the border of Sokovia and Latveria. “Right,” Nat began, “we’ve got lots of speculation for you, but first what facts we have and what we think is the most important finding. Lebka Hrad, technically in Sokovia, though about half of the land traditionally commanded by the castle is in Latveria. We had
to look at GPS to be sure what country it’s in. It’s that close.”

“Skull Castle?” Steve blurted out. Had he gotten the translation on that right? He’d picked up some of the language when he’d gone through in ‘44, but he wasn’t fluent.

“Yep.” Clint confirmed. “Hydra’s never been what you’d call subtle.”

Natasha glared, and they shut up. More zooming, and they had an impressively accurate photo of the terrain. “Castle itself.” Natasha spoke and a square-ish shape lit up. “Built like a blockhouse, not like Sleeping Beauty’s. The castle has been built and rebuilt since the early thirteen hundreds; every time they added more fortification and another layer to the walls. There are actually two walls. Inner.” A wavery ring went around the block, fully complete with a single gate. “Outer.” The outer line was incomplete, only about half the ring built. “The outer wall takes advantage of natural landscape for fortification, and with what Clint and I saw, is pretty complete once you include cliff faces, lakes, and rivers.”

Images shifted to a slideshow of vehicles on a single-lane road. “We hung around and got traffic for twenty-four hours. As you can see, it’s pretty damned heavy for a single entrenched position, even if they’re shipping in all their supplies. Heavy literally; the trucks are full, judging from the suspension. They’re empty when they leave.”

Tony and Bruce were scribbling madly; Steve wondered what they were seeing that he wasn’t.

“We’ve got estimates of how much they’re hauling in there by volume, every day. We don’t know what’s in the trucks but whatever there is, there’s a lot of it.”

She sat down, and Clint stood up. “I tried to get an estimate, guards and staff and all that. We couldn’t get very close, and even with my wondrous eyesight and modern imaging equipment we could smuggle in while claiming to be bird-watching, accuracy is not high.” A blurry photo of a couple men in olive drab uniforms and short haircuts popped up. “They’re all in uniform with identical haircuts, which makes getting an accurate count of the entire garrison tricky. But guard rotations are heavy at the block house and the inner wall. At least forty active at any one time. They’re well funded and organized, trained, and there’s a bunch of them.”

“The haircuts make me think they’ve been there a while, without leave. If they could get out to a town somewhere they wouldn’t be having a single guy cut everyone’s hair.” Natasha put in.

“And if they’re not going out to blow off steam, they’re well-disciplined and have tough, respected officers who have boots on their necks. There’s no sign of recreation anywhere in the compound. They come out, they walk around, they guard stuff, they go back in. Takes true believers or brainwashed or terrified to do that for a year and not get squirrely. Look at pranks in the US military for reference.”

Steve coughed back a laugh at that.

“No evidence in any of the nearby towns or villages of anyone coming in on R and R, and by nearby we mean within fifty miles. There’s nothing really what you’d call close. Fifty miles on one lane dirt mountain roads is a significant distance.” Nat added.

“Late one night, about five people in what looked like lab coats milled around outside for about ten minutes, in the innermost courtyard, before they were herded back inside. Looked like scientists to me. And if they aren’t cooking up something disastrous out of mad science and fascism, it’s not Hydra, am I right?” Clint said, pointing at an inner courtyard on the satellite photo. “And, weirdest for last, we have this guy.” A photo of someone in an old Hydra officer’s uniform popped up. He
was flanked by two others in old Hydra uniforms as well. “We risked a bit to get this photo, but he’s not in any databases JARVIS has been able to hack into so far. The monocle is a nice touch. Very Colonel Klink.”

Damn. Who? “He’s not familiar to me.” Steve added, nodding toward the photo on the screen.

Clint seemed to think about that for a while. “…okay. I honestly don’t know if that’s good or bad. We were hoping the photo might lead to some action from the UN or somebody, but there’s no way to prove it wasn’t taken any time since World War Two, so we’re screwed in that respect.” He sat back down.

Everyone absorbed for a while, many jotting notes. Steve mostly breathed carefully and told himself not to punch a hole in the wall, because it wouldn’t accomplish anything and would only give his idiot body something else to heal.

Phil stood. “Next; given the trucks hauling in loads all day, JARVIS and I began looking at imports to Latveria and Sokovia. In the past six months, both countries have drastically increased imports of heavy-industry components and materials. A list is available on the Avengers server, but they are both importing a lot of computer parts, micro machines like robotic actuators, and specialized steel and other alloys.” He glanced at Tony. “Considering they’re mining and producing their own carbon steel, the fact that they’re importing more is odd. They’re also bringing in molybdenum, titanium, and niobium. Pure forms as well as alloys. Stellite and inconel, also big imports. Plus a lot of others people pay less attention to.”

“Shit.” Tony muttered, calling up the list on his tablet. “No gold. Don’t know if I’m relieved or worried more.” He glanced up, caught confused looks. “The armor. It’s got a lot of gold-titanium alloy in it.”

“So they’re building something, but not armor.” Phil speculated.

Tony snorted. “No, they could definitely build workable armor with these metals. They just aren’t building a direct copy of mine.”

“What could they make with this?” Steve asked. He’d never heard of any of these metals before he’d gone under.

Reading through the list, Tony shook his head slowly, handed it to Bruce. Bruce glanced at it, swore, and began reading it more slowly. They looked at each other across Steve between them, and Steve REALLY did not like anything that made the two of them look like that.

“Anything they want.” Bruce finally admitted. “Ceramic composites, weapons-grade metal of all kinds, industrial magnets, superconductors…”

“The nozzles of some rocket engines are made with niobium.” Tony put in, grim as Steve had ever seen him.

“What would they use for fuel?” Phil asked.

Tony barked a not-laugh. “Fuel is the easy part, trust me. Steering them is hard. And they’ve got what they need to steer.”

Leo in particular looked very worried, and Steve did not like the implications of that. He was a good enough engineer that TONY respected him, and lacked Tony’s poker face. And right now, Leo looked like someone had killed his dog. Hell.
“Another question is how they’re paying for it. None of this stuff is cheap.” Pepper added.

“All right.” Steve said, trying to take charge. They all agreed this was bad. Next order of business. “What’s the word in Latveria?” Since Natasha had gone and gotten herself captured, he hoped there was some data worth it.

Natasha stood again. “Right. Short history for the non-spies, Latveria has been a state since the middle ages, and thanks to mountainous geography and brutal rulers, have held off pretty much all comers to remain an independent nation. Byzantines, Ottomans, Nazis, Soviets, you name ‘em, Latveria has told them all to fuck off. Because of that, Latveria’s got a pretty solid, homogeneous population and history and is actually a fairly peaceful, agricultural area. Two generations ago, the rulers had the bright idea to turn themselves into a banking capitol like Monaco and Switzerland, and they have done so with little fuss, allowing a bunch of cheese farmers to have the highest standard of living in Eastern Europe. They’re surprisingly socialist for what amounts to a dictatorship, and because of that, the citizens are happy with the current regime.”

“Is it still like Switzerland? It was like Switzerland when I was through.” Steve had to ask.

“It really is.” Clint confirmed. “Amazing food.”

Natasha swatted Clint in the head and continued. “Meanwhile, next door, Sokovia had no protective geography and was overrun by pretty much everyone. Refugees from the middle east one century, refugees from Europe the next, shifting borders, populations, and no government can get a foothold long enough to get anything accomplished. Lebka Hrad was originally built to guard the Sokovian approach into Latveria, or one of them.” she waved a hand and a photo appeared. “This is the current ruler of Latveria, Baron Victor VonDoom. Stark?”

Tony blinked a moment. “Oh, right. I know the guy. Went to MIT with him for a couple years. All the world’s really brilliant people washed up at MIT during the late eighties and early nineties, seems like. Anyway, Vic is an arrogant fuck, but a really smart one. He may be better than I am at the art of turning technology into money; he started from practically nothing, I had Dad’s crazy shit to build on. He founded VonDoom Enterprises, rose like a rocket, fell like a rock. About five years back, Reed Richards – also at MIT with us, complete dick of a person, famously described as the world’s dumbest smart person – talked him into some kind of experiment on the new VonDoom Enterprises space station. Details are sketchy. The space station was destroyed, there were lengthy hospital stays for everyone who was on the station at the time including Vic and Richards, and Vic kind of went off the rails after. That would be when his fiancee and head of R and D dumped him to run off with Richards. Susan Storm. Also went to MIT, equally brilliant but much less stupid with it. The board of VonDoom Enterprises kicked Victor to the curb, and he went back to Latveria in a snit, where he has since produced a few surprisingly good scientific articles on metallurgy and electrical power, and has begun small-scale consumer electronics design and production all within the borders of Latveria, using Latverian talent and workers. Now that I spell it out, he’d be a perfect Hydra recruit. He’s already pissed at the world, and has an entire country for them to use.”

“Exactly.” Nat agreed. “No one has seen much of VonDoom in the past five years, not even in his own country, that I could get word on. Worse, everyday people in Latveria are scared. Worried. About him. Not much of anything rattles Latverians, so if they’re worried, it’s time to worry. There are rumors, of robots and androids and metal men walking the mountains. Some say they’re protecting Latveria, some say they’re killing indiscriminately. No one will talk about it much. But putting together the rumors with all the rest of the intel we have, SOMETHING is going on.”

“Hydra and Victor VonDoom are building a robot army.” Tony sighed.

“We don’t know.” Phil stressed. “But none of the information we have rules out the possibility.”
Tony laid his head down on the table for a long moment, then said “shut up, Darcy.”

She laughed, grim. “I told you. It’s not always fun, being right.”

Tony made some sort of grumbling noise of agreement.

“Is it possible the scepter or gem are being used in some way to bring animation to these robots?” Thor asked, bringing the point around to his biggest worry.

“Oh, shit.” Bruce murmured.

“No idea.” Tony told Thor. “We don’t know enough about the gems or how they work, but considering how the cube worked, it’s a possibility we can’t ignore.” He turned to Phil. “Think the Sokovians are going to give us permission to bust up Castle Anthrax?”

Castle Anthrax?

“I’ll be putting all of this in a report and working on them.” Phil agreed. He looked at Steve “If Barnes has any intel, it could be invaluable.”

Steve nodded gloomily. He really didn’t want to give Buck another panic attack, but this was big. “I’ll talk to him.” he glanced at Jemma. “Is there any way we can avoid another episode? If we can? Try at least?”

“I have some ideas that might help.” Jemma told him.

That was promising.

“Oh, right, Barnes.” Clint said. “Last bit of fuckery, no idea where this fits into anything. If it fits anywhere. The Winter Soldier sighting that Fury had rumors of? Turns out that was legit. Someone with a metal arm is operating out of Prague. Mostly small-time terror attacks for hire. Doesn’t seem to be affiliated with much of anyone that we could figure out, even Hydra.” He turned to Phil. “That’s why we did that layover. Tried to track down any details. Nothing.”

“Hydra trying to keep the terror going?” Bruce asked.

“Or an opportunist, riding on the reputation, who is living longer than they should because Hydra’s busy with other things.” Nat said thoughtfully.

They all sat and stared at each other for a good bit.

“Everyone go, get some rest, think this over, look at the data we have on the servers. Back here after lunch tomorrow.” Phil announced. “We’ll see what Barnes has to say, discuss any new ideas.”

Right. Steve really wanted a nap.

-A-

Tony was standing on the safe side of the Hulk Tank wall, trying to be subtle about the repulsor on his hand. He knew May and Hill had noticed, but both of them had their own hands hovering near their handguns, so he figured they weren’t judging. “I am not sure this is wise.” he muttered.

“Neither are we.” May agreed.

“It will work.” Jemma insisted, next to him. He hoped to hell she was right.
“I hope to hell you’re right.” Sam replied, on his other side.

Inside the Tank, Steve was sitting across from Barnes. Thor and Bruce stood nearby, trying to look non-threatening, which was kind of hilarious. They’d brought in an overstuffed recliner, and covered it with blankets and pillows. Barnes insisted that sitting up was the best way to do anything (which was going to make arm removal a real trick) so he was wedged in with the softest, fluffiest things they could find; Darcy had contributed a couple stuffed animals. Betty had consulted with him about scent and memory triggers, with the removal of the arm in mind, and had moved in with aromatherapy. The whole place now smelled like flowers. Barnes seemed pretty relaxed, all things considered.

“We need you to look at these, Buck. You don’t have to agree to anything else. Jem thinks the medications will help, but you don’t have to-”

“Were you always such a nervous Nelly? Because I don’t remember you pulling this shit before.” Barnes interrupted. “You need intel, and I probably have intel. Right?”

“Well, yeah, but-” Steve said carefully.

They had all fought with Steve over going into the Tank with Barnes for this. Steve was doing a lot better but still moving pretty slow. Thor had finally stepped in and simply refused to allow him into the room without having Thor along. No one was quite sure who’d win a regular fight between Steve and Thor (smart money was on Thor but no one wanted to admit it), but with Steve still recovering, he didn’t stand a chance.

Tony was becoming really fond of Thor. There was a hell of a lot more to him than pretty hair and arms like tree trunks.

Barnes glanced up, out of the Tank and into the observation room. He locked eyes with Jemma. “You think this will work, right?”

She nodded. “It should. And if it doesn’t work, it shouldn’t be upsetting, other than placing the IV. There shouldn’t be any major side effects, especially negative ones.”

“And we can use this as a dry run for removing the arm.”

“The data on how you respond to these drugs would be helpful, yes.” Jemma agreed. “If you’re uncomfortable with Bruce doing the IV, I can come in.”

“No you can’t.” Barnes said gently. “We’ll try it, but I’m not running a risk of hurting anyone.”

“You won’t hurt me.” Jemma told him.

Barnes smiled at her and shook his head. “Okay, Doc.” he said to Bruce. “Hook me up, let’s get this clusterfuck moving.” He held his hand out to Steve, who took it, gripping tightly.

First, Bruce put a nasal cannula on Barnes, slowly. They’d padded the hoses, trying to make them feel like anything other than what he was used to. Then they turned on what Tony insisted they call the weed feed; they’d extracted the useful bits from Bruce’s latest marijuana hybrid and vaporized it with oxygen. If it mellowed out Steve, it would work on Barnes. Bruce quietly put a tourniquet around his arm, found a vein above where Barnes was gripping Steve’s hand, swiped with alcohol. Barnes jumped at the alcohol. “Sorry,” Bruce said. “Should have warned you.”

Barnes shook his head. “It’s okay. They… they never bothered with that kind of stuff.” he shut his eyes, inhaled slowly. “Go for it.”
“Poking now.” Bruce said softly, and did his thing. He continued narrating every move and piece of tape until everything suited him. “All good.” Tony thought the next time he needed an IV, he was going to have Bruce do it.

“Give me a minute.” Barnes replied, eyes still shut, inhaling deeply. The moment stretched out. “Okay.”

“Starting the drugs.” Bruce said, and did so.

They all waited.

“I don’t know how Bruce is so soothing, but he is. I’m impressed.” Sam told Tony softly.

“He’s a sweet man.” Jemma agreed.

Except for the giant green rage monster, Tony reflected.

In the Tank, Barnes opened his eyes, and Tony could see they were very dilated, even from as far away as he was. That was probably good.

“Doctor Simmons, you are a genius.” Barnes told her.

Jem smiled happily. “I’m so glad it’s working.”

Barnes nodded carefully, even smiled slightly. Then he turned to Steve. “Okay, punk, let’s see what you’ve got.”

Steve opened the folder. The first photo was the castle.

“Lebka Hrad.” Barnes identified immediately, his voice sounding a little dreamy. He proceeded to recite a latitude and longitude that Tony would check, but he was pretty sure was the exact location. “I’ve never been there. The last time I was activated, this was given as ultimate fallback. Probably where I should have gone after the helicarriers crashed.”

“Ultimate fallback?” Steve asked softly.

“Always an entrenched Soviet or Hydra facility with officers and equipment to house me. If things went horribly wrong, that’s where I was supposed to report to. When the Soviets had me it was always behind the Iron Curtain.” He closed his eyes. “Give me a second.”

“Take your time.” Bruce said easily. “We’ve got drugs for days.”

That made Barnes chuckle slightly, good for Bruce. “Just… that’s where I would have ended up, if you hadn’t rescued me, Stevie. It kinda hits me once in a while.” He inhaled deeply a couple more times.

“You rescued yourself.” Steve told him.

Tony and Sam exchanged glances.

“Right. Next photo?” Barnes asked.

They’d gone in order of importance so they could cancel the interview at any time. With luck the most potentially upsetting stuff – by their reckoning – was first. Tony held his breath as Steve flipped the page.
Barnes stared for a long moment, shivered, and shut his eyes again. “Wolfgang von Strucker, calls himself a baron. No idea if it’s a legit title, or if so, where from. With Pierce down, probably the highest ranking Hydra officer left. I don’t know for sure, Hydra operates in cells and they kept me isolated. He’s the highest ranking one I can think of.” He paused. “You want the facts or my thoughts?”

“Whatever you’ve got.” Steve replied.

“Prancing, aristocratic shithead. Preaches the Hydra world order line, but thinks he’s better than everyone else while he’s spouting it; just like the Nazis in that regard. Only ran into him a couple times. He wasn’t particularly sadistic, but he called me obsolete once. Big into the mad science end of Hydra. Self-important. Egomaniac. Reminded me of the rich kids who used to come into our neighborhood on the weekends to cause trouble and lord it over the poor kids for fun.”

Great.

Flip, this picture of one of the other officers who'd been with Mister Monocle.

"Helmut Zemo, also claiming to be a baron." Barnes sneered for a moment. "Claiming they're commies for the proletariat, and yet none of them will give up their titles. Another weaselly little guy with no balls, exactly who you'd expect to find on the Hydra payroll. I don't know any personal details about him."

Steve flipped another page.

“Victor VonDoom. Flaming asshole, hates America and Americans. Works with Hydra but doesn’t seem like a true believer. More like one of those who like to watch the world burn. Never bumped into him much, and not in the last years at all. I was Pierce’s toy, here. VonDoom was off being angry in Europe.”

Another page. “...Prague?” Bucky said blankly, staring at the photo.

“Anything?” Steve asked.


“We have reports of a guy with a metal arm operating out of Prague.”

“Huh.” Bucky stared at the photo again. “Wonder what that’s about. I don’t remember it being one of my centers of operation, so it probably wasn’t. I’ve been through a couple times, especially in the Soviet years, but never based there.” He thought for a moment. “Losing me would be a huge embarrassment to Hydra, in the world terrorism network. Maybe they’re trying to keep up appearances? I don’t know. Not any real idea.”

“Okay.” Steve said easily. Prague had been a long shot. So was the next, last image.

“What the hell is that?” Barnes asked. He stared for a long moment, head tilting slowly. “Like a spear? Awfully shiny for a spear, though, and what’s with the glowing bit?”

“Ever seen it?” Steve asked.

Barnes really thought about that, even shut his eyes for a long moment, frowning. “Nothing. It have
a name?"

“Usually it is called the scepter.” Thor said very quietly.

There was a long pause as Barnes stared off into space, still frowning. “Maybe. A few years back? Passing mention. Maybe. I can’t be sure. I’ve never seen it, for sure.”

“All right.” Steve closed the folder. “One last question, if you’re up for it.”

“I sincerely do not remember you ever being this polite to me. It’s unnerving.”

Beside Tony, Sam chuckled.


Barnes shuddered violently, and grasped Steve’s hand again. He shut his eyes and breathed. “Shit.” He breathed some more. “Rumors. Once Pierce took me over he kept me more isolated than before. I didn’t hear as much day to day gossip. But there was a project. Is a project? I think ongoing. A major build. Had to be major if I heard about it. Ultron.”

“Is that the code name for the project? Something else?”

“I don’t know. But that’s what pops up in my head when I think about robots. Ultron.” He shivered again. “And whatever it is, it’s bad. I think bad enough I blocked it out.”

Shit. Given what Barnes REMEMBERED, how bad was that? Tony and Sam exchanged worried looks.

“That’s it. Thanks, jerk, you’ve helped a lot.” Steve said.

“You’re welcome, punk.” Bruce moved forward, and Barnes shook his head. “Leave the drugs for a minute, let me get a grip.”

“No problem. Say when.” Bruce said easily.

“You hear a lot about robotics, right, Stark?” Hill asked, not looking away from Barnes.

“Normally, yes. It’s my thing. Always has been my primary interest, personally, no matter what SI was doing.” Tony agreed.

“Know anything about Ultron?”

“No.”

“Should that scare the shit out of me?” Sam asked.

“Under the circumstances, I’d say yes.” Tony decided.

In the Tank, Steve turned and glared at them, and whoops, super hearing. He mouthed ‘sorry’ at Steve, and Barnes grinned, so maybe that was something.
Data, useful and not.

Chapter Summary

“I have an idea.” Tony said suddenly.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.” Steve responded, with no irony whatsoever.

“Shut up, you.” Tony said to Steve without heat. He turned to the room at large. “I could do a flyover in a stealth suit, rig it up with all the sensors we can think of, first. See what we see.”

Chapter Notes

I hope y'all find this even half as amusing as I do. A good laugh for a Monday morning, with luck.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“Ultron.” Phil repeated. Never heard of it. He looked around the room. “Anybody?” Nothing but shaking heads. They’d had rest and a couple meals, but nothing brilliant had occurred to him, or to Clint. Natasha had been running on fumes when they got back, and slept for most of the twelve hours since the last meeting. Still, they had a lot of great minds. Who knew. “Thoughts?”

“I ran a search on all the digitized files we have so far. Nothing.” Darcy told them all. “Not only under Ultron, but any related topic I could think of. Not even vague discussions of robotics, which is weird when you think of it.”

“Same here on what SHIELD servers I can access.” Skye said.

“JARVIS is on it, but I’ve got him operating at peak caution levels, so it’s not going to be fast. We’ve potentially got another consciousness or AI out there we don’t know about, remember. We don’t want a direct throwdown between the two of them.” Tony told him. “We’ve got a lot of redundancies and other safety mechanisms running right now. It slows everything down.”

“Sir is requiring I use human-modeled hacking techniques. It is exceedingly tedious.” JARVIS added.

Skye perked up. “Want some help?”

“Yes, Ms Skye, that would be most appreciated, thank you. We are operating through tertiary servers at a remote location for secrecy and safety, but of course-”

“Each bounce takes more time. Yeah. Especially when we really don’t know what we’re looking for.” She paused to think. “Is Sokovia still using mechanical switches on their phone lines? I know Latveria’s gone fiber optic, but Sokovia has a rep for being low-end, leftover Soviet tech, held together with clothes-hanger wire and prayer.”
“They are, and the mechanical switches are in bad repair.” JARVIS announced. There was a pause. “They are indeed running on an ancient phone system installed by the Soviets.”

“Cool. We can go old school, pretend it’s ninety-five, it’ll take a miracle to realize they’re even being hacked, and weeks to trace it. Plus we can bounce through a telecom satellite and block our signal that way. Hard wire has all kinds of security advantages.”

“It’ll take weeks to find anything.” Tony pointed out.

“No one hacks via phone lines any more. The lack of firewalls makes up for it. We might be able to get a straight line to their data.” Skye insisted. “Well, relatively straight, ignoring the bouncing around.”

“Go for it.” Tony said. “I’ll watch your technique.”

Steve looked confused; Phil hoped Tony would explain some of that later. Or someone would. He wasn’t terribly conversant in hacking techniques himself, and what little he knew was from working with Skye.

“Another of our bigger problems.” Phil reluctantly brought up. “If we go to the UN with ALL of our data, we have to admit that Sergeant Barnes is here and providing intel. I think his information, backing up our own, would get all this taken much more seriously. But again, we have to admit he’s here.”

Tony hastily swallowed some coffee. “Nah, we’re good on that end. Secretary-General S’Yan knows he’s here. I brought him over to see Barnes with his own two eyes, a couple days after Barnes came in. If we go to him with all this, as well as what Barnes has verified, he’ll take it seriously.”

“You didn’t think to mention that?” Steve demanded.

“No,” Tony replied more calmly than Phil expected, “because I knew you’d flip out. S’Yan is a solid guy; I’m not saying we trust the UN as a whole, because that would be insane. But S’Yan can be trusted.”

“How the hell do you know the former prime minister of Wakanda? Who is now the head of the UN?” Clint asked in wonder.

“I know everybody. Or damn near. Some of them even like me. But I figured it was a good idea to have independent verification that Barnes was here, in case someone like this asshole in Prague started stirring up trouble. No one’s gonna take our word that Barnes has been here, but they’ll believe S’Yan.”

“A little notice, next time.” Phil said between his teeth. He knew he was trying to build a team with independent agents but this was getting damned irritating.

“Yeah, fine.” Tony flipped a hand. Phil glared. “All RIGHT.” Tony agreed.

“With that in mind, we’ll prepare a report in the next day or so, and take it over to Secretary S’Yan.” Phil said as calmly as he could. “Any other input?”

“The imports list on the Avengers server looks like a dream shopping list for someone entering Battlebots.” Leo told everyone.

“In English for the old farts and technologically clueless.” Tony reminded him, grinning. “Come on, kid. We’ve talked about this.”
“Right. Uh.” Leo had to think for a moment. “They’re bringing in parts that could be used to build very advanced, weaponized robots. Quite a few of them.”

“Fantastic.” Clint muttered.

“Any word on the gem?” Thor asked.

“No,” Natasha replied, “but if Billy was right about location, it’s very likely the gem is being held at the castle too. At the least, if Hydra has it, this is a very good first place to look for it.”

Thor nodded.

“I have an idea.” Tony said suddenly.

“Jesus, Mary, and Joseph.” Steve responded, with no irony whatsoever.

“Shut up, you.” Tony said to Steve without heat. He turned to the room at large. “I could do a flyover in a stealth suit, rig it up with all the sensors we can think of, first. See what we see.”

“Stealth suit?” Bruce asked.

“Carbon fiber, graphene, nanoparticles, tech shit. Superconducting skin. Reflector panels. Wouldn’t hold up in a fight for two minutes, but it is INVISIBLE, baby. Even visually.”

“That’s actually not a bad idea. Gamma rays, anything else we can associate with the scepter, see what’s there.” Bruce said thoughtfully.

“Could we do a flash with a large-scale X-ray spectrometer?” Leo asked. “X-ray fluorescence shouldn’t kill anyone, normally, and with all the rare metals going on, might give us some ideas. It won’t be terribly accurate, but any data’s better than none, right?”

“Illegal as fuck,” Tony speculated. “Don’t tell the NRC or they’ll make my life a living hell. I just got them off my ass from- Never mind. But if we did it right, we could probably get a decent spread, cover most of the compound with a couple-three passes.”

“Some Hydra agents may develop thyroid problems.” Bruce told Leo with a shrug and a chuckle.

“English?” Steve sighed.

“Short version,” Bruce began, “you shine a low-powered x-ray onto something, and you use sensors to read what’s reflected to tell what metals are there. Sort of like visual light, how you see color? When light waves reflect off the surface of something and are read by your eye.”

“The ray gun in my shop.” Tony told Steve. “A big version of that. Not terribly safe, but not horribly dangerous either.”

“Probably like a week’s worth of standing out in the sun, in a minute or two.” Bruce said thoughtfully.

“The real danger would be to Tony, but we can shield him.” Leo agreed.

“All right, get on that, but do NOT go off and do a flyover of ANYWHERE, AT ALL, particularly Eastern Europe, without telling anyone.” Phil told them. “I mean it. Not even test runs without discussing it first.”

Leo and Tony both brightened with something concrete to do.
“I will go along, since sending Billy would be horribly irresponsible. If Professor Xavier would even consider it, which I strongly doubt.” Thor told them.

“Uh. What?” Tony asked.

Thor looked around the room, first in confusion and then in disbelief. “Young William. Remember his report? He said there was a magic user helping hide the scepter. He could not pinpoint the castle, only gave us the idea where to look.”

“Oh, shit.” Clint said under his breath.

“We cannot know what spells or methods they are using to watch the skies, or what magics they will use to defend the area if we fly over.” Thor explained. “Since our team has no one experienced in magic?” he asked, looking around at them.

“No, I think you’re it.” Phil told him.

“That is… worrying. I am not well versed. But given Tony’s lack of magical experience, someone should go.” Thor glanced around again, frowning. “Do we know someone skilled, who is not a youngster?”

“Just that mage down in the Village. I can try to talk to him, but he probably won’t help and he might be an asshole about it.” Natasha reminded Phil. “On the other hand, I’d love a chance to beat the shit out of him, so it’ll probably work out either way.”

Phil nodded. “Give it a try. Don’t get turned into a newt. Thor, plan on going.”

Thor did his respectful head bow. “Perhaps the Allfather can spare someone, since this is his quest as much as anyone’s. I will see.”

It was so refreshing to have someone capable who also sat, listened, and helped while following orders. The fact that it was the least-expected person to do that was par for the course with this crew.

“Oh, right! Forgot.” Tony said. “JARVIS!”

An image of Lebka Hrad popped on the wall screen. Phil stared a moment and realized… things were moving. “Is this a live satellite feed?” he asked in disbelief. They had imaging satellites? SINCE WHEN?

“Yeah, took most of the night to get in position. Don’t use it much any more, it’s a holdover from the SI weapons days. Imaging isn’t as good as the new ones, but for what it’s worth, there it is.”

Phil gave in and pinched the bridge of his nose, telling himself that wasn’t a migraine he was feeling.

Clint stared at the screen, back at Tony. “You didn’t think to lead with that, dude?”

“What? It’s not like you can see anything useful. Resolution is shit.”

Natasha swore under her breath. “It is very obvious you are not a spy, Stark.”

“I have a theme song.” Tony snarked back. "A really loud theme song."

Before it could devolve, Phil stood. “Clint, do what you do, see what data you can find. Further discussion, ideas, thoughts?” No one spoke. “Let’s get to work, then. Plan on another meeting in the next day or so, I’ll put the word out when there’s news to discuss.”
At the end of the meeting, Tony blathered some rambling half-reason about why Steve needed to go back to the shop with him. He claimed it was to keep an eye on Steve and make him behave himself. Steve glared, but humored him.

Today Steve had gotten dressed in his usual; goofy tourist tee shirt (‘Toad Suck State Park’, what even) and worn jeans, and was moving a lot more easily. With luck yesterday’s idiotic workout hadn’t done him any harm. Once in the lab, he got the plus-sized tablet Tony had given him for art, and asked, “Can I get that satellite feed on this? And any other satellite photos, and maps?”

“Sure, hang on.” Tony hunched over his own computer for a moment, finding the proper web sites and feeds and sending them over. JARVIS had told them all that if he was required to play human and work through all the protections and fail-safes that Tony had put in place, they could jolly well do their own grunt work on the computers for a while.

Everyone had agreed. Tony was the only one having trouble because Tony was really the only one used to having JARVIS do his grunt work, anyway.

“Thanks.” Steve said absently.

“What good is that satellite feed? You can’t see anything.” Tony had to ask, sitting down at his bench and calling up his inventory of silicone wafers for this crazy X-ray idea. He might have to swipe some parts from downstairs, which would mean making up some dumb excuse for his engineers. Not because it was illegal, but because they would whine if they knew he was building something off the wall and didn’t include them.

Steve stared at him for a long moment, looking kind of shocked. “Guard posts, rotations, timing for all sorts of movement. You can see people moving around, even if you can’t identify them individually. Approaches, retreats, probable fallback plans of theirs, ways to get in for us. If they drill, how they drill. All sorts of things.”

“Oh.” Tony thought about that. He really had never done the sane, considered approach to this sort of thing before.

“So, ray gun?” Steve asked.

It took Tony a minute. “Right.” He rummaged, found his in a bottom drawer. “X-ray spectrometer.” He held the ‘barrel’ end against his tool box, pulled the trigger. There was a beep, and he showed Steve the screen. “Look. Steel. Well, shows up as iron and some other stuff, it’s an elements thing. You can do it on any type of metal and it gives you elements and percentages. From there you can usually guess alloy; it’s programmed to identify common alloys. Fairly accurate, sure as hell useful for how fast it works and doesn’t require a sample to destroy.”

Steve got up and came over to take a look. “Ingenious.”

“Actually, the ingenious bit is how it’s cooled; we had these for years but they were the size of a refrigerator and used liquid oxygen. Someone applied computer cooling tech, and suddenly, hand held ray guns. Pisses me off I didn’t do it myself, when I think of the giant, touchy, annoying piece of shit I worked with for years.” He paused. “Actually, let’s do a more interesting demonstration.” He leaned toward the door. “YO, DARCY!”

“The necklace?” Steve asked, surprising Tony. Yeah, Steve was pretty damned smart. He needed to remember that.
“What?” Darcy demanded, walking in.

“Come here.” Tony beckoned, waving the analyzer. “I wanna see something.”

“If that’s some laser that makes my clothes fall off, I will beat you to death with one of your own wrenches.”

Steve clutched his ribs and giggled, wincing.

“No!” Tony insisted. “For fuck’s sake, my hell-raising days are way behind me. And I never did that kinda thing, come on, I TALKED women - WILLING WOMEN! - out of their clothes, I’m not an asshole. I want to see what that necklace is made out of. Hang on a second.” Tony rummaged for a different nozzle thing for the analyzer, to focus the beams on her necklace and not her skin. It’d be safe anyway, like getting a dental X-ray, but why be stupid?

“You are not holding that thing to my neck. No way in hell.”

“It’s perfectly safe!” Tony insisted, still rummaging.

“You fly around in a suit of armor and blow shit up, your definition of safety is invalid.” She turned to the window between the labs, waved her arms, and then motioned Bruce over when she got their attention.

Steve was still laughing, looked like it hurt. “Oh, quit that.” He grumbled at Steve.

Bruce walked in. “What are you doing?” He asked Tony.

“Why? Why is it always me who is responsible for everything questionable?”

“Because you’re you.” Bruce said.

“I want to use the analyzer on her necklace. One of my degrees is in metallurgy, am I not allowed to be curious?”

Bruce’s face immediately shifted to curiosity, too. Ha. “I have wondered.”

“Oh my GOD.” Darcy snarled at both of them. “Fine. Do it as safely as possible.”

Tony rummaged some more, pulled out a sheet of lead and cut a square off it. “We can put this between your skin and the necklace, blocks the X-rays, all right?”

“You idiot, is that lead? That’s probably more dangerous than the X-rays.” Bruce said with disgust. “Hang on.” He walked back over to the main lab and started rummaging in their first aid kit.

Steve was still trying to hold his ribs together and snicker. “Oh, shut up and sit down.” Tony told him in disgust. To his surprise, instead of going back to the couch, Steve took a seat nearby on a stool. Tony whistled and Dum-E raised his head. “Go get Steve’s pillow for him, okay?” Dum-E gave an affirming whistle and Steve got his rib cage supported before he laughed himself into a re-broken rib.

“All right.” Bruce said, returning. He had a roll of medical adhesive tape, and swiftly began covering the sheet of lead with it. “This will keep your skin from absorbing the lead, and the lead will block the X-rays. You know those super-heavy aprons they lay over you when you get an X-ray?” he asked Darcy.

Darcy nodded.
“Exactly the same thing.” Bruce assured her.

“If it’s dangerous, why are you handling it?” Steve asked Bruce.

Bruce shrugged. “Hulk thing. Immune.” He continued taping busily. “Tony handles it because he’s an idiot.”

“Plus compared to the palladium poisoning, a couple lead molecules are nothin’.” Tony said carelessly, uncomfortable at the looks he got from all three after he said it. “What? I have a super-powered liver!”

Jane walked in. “Are you abusing my lab assistant? Because that is forbidden. I have rules. Rule one is be nice to Darcy.”

“We’re being nice!” Tony insisted.

Bruce was still taping. “We’re trying to get a read on that necklace, we’re curious what it’s made out of.”

Jane’s frown instantly cleared. “Ooo, good idea. I’ve been wondering, too. Thor gave me his names for the metals, didn’t mean anything to me, other than gold. What the hell is orichalc?”

Darcy rolled her eyes. Steve clutched his pillow to his side.

“Okay!” Bruce finished, even taping the edges. “I’m going to thread this between your neck and the necklace, okay?” Darcy nodded, and he did so, gently, on the side of her neck. “Tony?”

Tony raised the ‘gun’. “There will be a click and a beep, and you’ll gain some superpowers.”

“NOT FUNNY.” Darcy told him.

“Kinda funny.” Steve wheezed.

Click-beep, and Jane, Bruce, and Tony leaned over the screen of the analyzer. “That can’t be right.”

Tony mumbled.

“Sure it can.” Jane replied. “Asgard. You have no idea.”

“But” Tony said weakly. “Hang on, Darcy, don’t take that lead strip out.” He leaned forward and did another click-beep against Darcy’s neck.

“You really are done now.” Darcy said with a voice of doom, and pulled the strip out, tossing it on the work bench.

Bruce was hunched over the screen again. “Same results. It’s correct.”

All three scientists turned to stare at Darcy for a long, silent moment.

“I wonder what the stones are.” Tony said thoughtfully.

“I’ll tag Thor.” Bruce said, pulling out his phone.

-A-

All right, first the threat of ray guns against her neck, then lead poisoning, and now Jane, Tony, and Bruce were staring at her like… well, if it was Jemma she’d want to dissect her, but with these three,
they probably wanted to take apart the necklace. Darcy was reasonably sure that wouldn’t end well, given the hum of something – whatever – she’d felt when it had been put on her. “Forget it. Whatever you’re all thinking, forget it.”

Tony stepped up with a magnifier and took a closer look. “I think the core of the rope is vibranium. How heavy does this feel?” he asked, poking the main coil of the necklace.

She wanted to ask figuratively or literally. Not that they’d get the half-joke. Ugh, scientists. “The jewels in the front feel heavy against my neck but the rest isn’t much.”

“Vibranium- How does this read vibranium? It’s not a known metal.” Bruce was still staring at the analyzer screen.

“Reprogrammed it.” Tony told him, getting a different magnifier.

“Of course you did. Platinum, rhodium, what’s this peak?” Bruce asked.

“Ruthenium.” Tony said absently. “I think that’s the crystallized strand.”

“And some gold, for the hell of it.” Jane finished.

All three turned to stare at Darcy some more. “Oh, shut up.” she told them.

“It’s really pretty.” Steve told her innocently. “There’s a balance of elements, between the stones, and the.”

“I know when you are bullshitting me and I will get a wrench.” Darcy told him. She was in no mood, especially with that grin on Steve’s face.

Tony kept inspecting the necklace, muttering to himself. “How’d Thor get it around your neck? No sign of work-hardening anywhere along the length...” he moved behind her. “No wrinkles, no crimps, no breaks or cracks. Usually torcs look like shit at the back, where they’ve been bent to put them on and take them off. I saw Thor put it on you with my own two eyes and it shouldn’t have been possible, with these metals. They don’t bend. It sure as hell shouldn’t look like it’s straight out of a forge, after.”

“Yes, my friends?” Thor asked, striding in. He was wearing worn jeans, boots, and the ‘What’s Opera, Doc?’ tee shirt Darcy had given him and she leaned on him when he got in range. He was like the big brother she always wanted. He was gorgeous, yes, but to her he was just a big brother. Between Thor and her response to Steve, she really needed to get her hormones checked.

“What are the stones in this necklace?” Tony said, standing in front of Darcy again, magnifier still in hand, now checking out the stones. “Amazing clarity.”

“Diamonds.” Thor said easily. “I would have told it all to you, little one, but you did not seem to care about the value of it.” he explained to Darcy.

“That’s because I don’t care. It’s pretty and you gave it to me.” she told Thor with a smile. “These guys are being science bros again, got all curious.”

“Ah.” Thor nodded, giving her a one-armed hug. “For some, it is the learning, not the knowing, that is the joy.”

“That’s damned wise, Thor.” Steve said with a grin.
Thor grinned back.

"Yeah, the diamonds are fab, but what are the red stones? Rubies? I don’t see any silk in them."

Tony asked, finally standing back from Darcy with the damned magnifier.

"No." Thor said in confusion. "Diamonds. It is precious metals, and diamonds."

"The red stones are diamonds?" Tony said in shock, grabbing for the necklace. Darcy didn’t feel anything, but Tony yelped when his fingers connected, and he jerked away, shaking his hand. "Shit!"

"It protects its wearer, and you are making her feel threatened." Thor said, disapproval in every word.

"Sorry." Tony told her. "Really. You know how we get, but we come in peace."

Darcy rolled her eyes. "I know EXACTLY how you get. What’s the big deal?" Red diamonds. Those were rare, she thought. Maybe? She wasn’t up on gemstones of the world. It wasn’t like a country kid in debt from college could afford them.

Tony laughed a little. "The largest red diamond ever found on this planet is worth about twenty million dollars and is maybe a tenth the size of ONE of these. I’m estimating carats; the cuts on these aren’t like the ones we use. So, what, half a billion each? Cost goes up exponentially by size, and these are huge. More? If you can even put a price on them."

-A-

Darcy swayed a little at Tony’s bald pronouncement of value, and Steve got to her at about the same time Thor got an arm around her, and they led her to the couch and sat her down. Without prompting, she put her head between her knees. Steve rubbed her back.

"Is she all right? What is wrong?" Thor said with concern, laying a protective hand over the back of Darcy’s head.

"It’s all right. It’s just… that necklace is worth a hell of a lot of money here." Jane said carefully, coming to sit on the arm of the couch nearest Thor and patting Darcy’s back.

"Yes?" Thor was genuinely confused. "She has helped twice, now, to correct mistakes made by Asgard, and has been a stout and true friend to me, as well as to you. To all of us."

Steve let himself grin. He always enjoyed seeing people get what they deserved.

Bruce and Tony stayed by the work bench, in some kind of argument. The theme of it seemed to be "I was just CURIOUS." and "You couldn’t have broken that a little more carefully?" so Steve ignored them, continuing to rub Darcy’s back.

Dum-E rolled over with a bottle of water and whistled. "Thanks." Steve told him, taking it. "Here, Darce. Sit up, have a drink."

Darcy flopped back, took the bottle, drank some, and then held it to the side of her face. He assumed the cold helped. "Fuck, Thor, what in hell?"

"What?" Thor said, still genuinely confused. "It is worthy of you, nearly."

"It’s not the value – well, yes, of course it’s the value, Jesus H Christ, dude, but no it’s not the value.
How in hell are you supposed to top this for Jane?” Darcy demanded.

Oh. That. Yes, Darcy always did think of the human side of things they all missed.

Thor stared at his feet, and Jane tried to be invisible. “I have one for her.” Thor said softly. “Of a different design, done with blue, yellow, and white diamonds in the patterns of the bifrost and the stars she loves.” The huge shoulders moved in a shrug. “She will not take it.”

Darcy immediately turned on Jane. “What in bleeding hell is WRONG with you?”

Right, this looked like Steve’s exit. Unfortunately it took him a moment to shoo Dum-E out of the way and get up, so he heard more.

“Odin hates me.” Jane told Darcy. “Like, HATES me. He compared me to a goat. I’m not wild about him, either.”

“So? You’ll be dead of old age centuries before Thor takes the throne, and you spend all your time here anyway!” Darcy said with more than usual bluntness.

Ow. Steve tried not to wince. Or literally run away.

“Thor wants to give me immortality with it.” Jane said through her teeth. “I’m taking some time to think about it.”

“SHIT.” Darcy said.

By then Steve was far enough away he could ignore the discussion, jerked out his phone, and texted Sam blindly, something about an emergency. It must have been good because Sam appeared almost immediately. Steve, Bruce, and Tony, all huddled by the work bench trying not to hear the discussion on the couch, pointed immediately to the intergalactic relationship issues happening.

“Uh huh.” Sam told them. “I know y’all are guilty of something, we will be talking later.” Then he went and sat in the spot Steve had been in.

“So. Uh. That’s how an X-ray fluorescent spectrometer works.” Tony said weakly.


“Be anywhere but here.” Tony finished.

“Yes.” Steve agreed.

“You’re both morons.” Bruce told them, going back to his lab.

“Mario Kart. Common room.” Tony decided.

“Good idea.” Steve agreed.

-A-

Sam walked into the common room, took in the two men playing Mario Kart on the couch, and said “You ASSHOLES” with feeling.

Barnes, who was hooked into the game somehow from the Tank, dropped his remote, fell back on his couch, and began laughing.
“No, seriously.” Sam said, aggrieved. “I do PTSD. All my training? All my experience? PTSD, trauma, crisis management. Military stuff. I thought when I came here I’d be helping you guys through all the crazy battle shit you deal with, SPACE ALIENS, REMEMBER THEM? That’s my thing, hey, I’d be useful! But no. NO. A couple weeks around here, and all it’s been is relationships. I’m gonna wind up taking classes on relationship counseling this fall. I NEVER WANTED TO BE A MARRIAGE COUNSELOR YOU MOTHERFUCKERS. Why do you not have PTSD? You should all have PTSD. But no. RELATIONSHIPS. IT’S LIKE GODDAMN HIGH SCHOOL.”

Steve seemed at a loss, sincerely wanting to say something kind or positive. Tony fuckin’ Stark just laughed his ass off.

“Sorry.” Steve said. He seemed kind of sincere about it, though Sam could tell he didn’t really understand what he was so upset about.

“Shut up.” Sam walked back out. Dammit, relationships. The Avengers should be in a pit of PTSD, struggling to function through anxiety attacks. He could HELP with that. And what was he dealing with? Marriage counseling.

It was just like them.

Assholes.

-A-

“You said, before, you don’t mind coming to us.” Clint said, offering a beer without moving from where he was slouched down in a chair on the balcony of his apartment. His currently purple hair was on end, he had on a Black Widow tee shirt, and ripped jeans, and had dark circles under his eyes.

“No, I don’t.” Sam said, taking the beer, twisting off the cap, and sitting next to him. After a moment’s consideration, he put his feet up on the railing with Clint’s. He drank some beer – good stuff – and waited.

Clint finally sighed heavily. “You are here because Phil wants me to talk to you.”

Sam nodded.

Clint gave him the side-eye for a moment. “That reverse-position thing you did to get Phil to work with you? ‘What if it was Clint, having this problem, wouldn’t you want him to get help’? Now he’s doing it to me. Thanks for that.”

Sam grinned. “I’m glad to see it’s working out.”

Clint half-laughed, shook his head. “Yeah. Before, both of us… well, both of us were amazed the other was willing to live with them, so we tiptoed around, trying not to rock the boat in any way.”

“And now?”

“Now Phil had this bright idea we actually talk about our feelings, and from there, we’re gotten a lot more secure? trusting? of our feelings for each other, and now both of us are willing to fight with the other to see they take care of themselves.”

Sam nodded. “Sounds good.”

“It’s great when I’m badgering him into talking to you. Not so cool when he turns it around on me.”
He had a faint grin on his face like he was getting the joke, so Sam let it ride.

Clint tossed a beer bottle cap over his shoulder without looking, and Sam turned to watch it fall into the wastebasket in the kitchen, about ten feet behind them, at a weird angle. “Do you do that stuff without thinking, or is it for fun?”

Clint considered. “There’s a certain satisfaction in it.”

Fair enough. Sam drank more beer.

“You’re gonna wait me out, aren’t you.” Clint grumbled, resigned.

“Yup.” Sam agreed. Hey, he’d been called in, so Clint had something to say, right? Plus it was a nice day, and the chairs were comfortable, and the beer was good. This beat the hell out of his dingy little office in the VA basement.

“I had a couple nightmares last night.”

Ah. “That’s pretty normal, all things considered.”

Clint gave him a dirty look.

“No, seriously, I get them too.”

“We probably all do.” Clint said thoughtfully.

“Likely.” He knew quite a few people wandering around the Tower who’d told him so. Including the other two-thirds of Strike Team Delta. “Did you talk to Phil about it at all?”

“Tried. Can’t.” Clint admitted. “All the words get stuck.”

That also was pretty common. “How bad were they?” Look at him, doing actual PTSD counseling like he was trained for!

Clint sort of shrugged. “How do I know? For a normal person? Bad, probably? On the sliding scale of Clint Barton’s fucked up life, not too bad. Way better than the ones right after the Invasion.”

Sam waited.

Clint glared. “You’d make a damn fine interrogator.”

First corporate negotiator, now interrogator. It was nice to be appreciated. “Good to have a fallback.”

Clint rolled his eyes. “It’s all tangled up in that goddamn scepter. It fucked me over, and killed Phil, and now we’re going after it. And there’s a magic user at the other end.”

Yeah. Sam had kind of expected some of the crew to start having issues when it became obvious they were going to try to find the damn thing. Natasha was the one he was really worried about; she’d lost both sides of Team Delta to it, in different ways. “Think of sitting this one out?”

“And send who? Barnes? He’s on shaky ground and has never worked with any of us but Steve before. Add in the trust issues. Or Kate? No. No way in hell I’m sending her into a situation because I’m afraid it’s too dangerous for ME.” He shook his head. “No. They need a sniper at their backs, and I’m it.”

The heroic psychology in a nutshell. One day Sam would write a paper. Then burn it so no one
killed him for what he wrote. Was it ego, when they really WERE the only ones who could do the job? “Can I ask some questions?”

“It’s why you’re here aren’t you?”

Not really, but okay, they could roll with that. “Since no one’s been giving me background on much of anything, I’ve been going through the SHIELD servers and reading old mission reports, stuff like that, trying to figure out what in hell went on before I got here.” There were a couple action movies that needed to be made. Holy SHIT, Strike Team Delta. He wondered if Steve had any idea who he was dealing with.

“Of course you did.”

What else was he supposed to do? “Can I ask about that whole Loki go-’round y’all had?”

Clint made a weary ‘go ahead’ gesture.

Sam had spent a lot of time thinking about how to word this, when it came up – because he’d KNOWN it would come up. Here’s hoping he was as good as he thought. “When you shot Fury, why didn’t you kill him?”

“What?” Clint’s face was blank. Apparently no one had ever asked that. Someone should have.

“Fury. Loki told you to shoot him, so you did, right?”

“Yeah. From what I remember. It’s all sorta foggy.” Clint scrubbed a hand over his hair.

“In the chest. You had to know Fury was wearing a vest, hell, I’d expect him to be. You shot Fury right in the middle of his trauma plate with a handgun, then you walked right past him and didn’t follow up with a double-tap to the head. That’s standard. I know that, and I’m a damned medic. But you didn’t do it. How come?” There’d been a lot of speculation in the reports. The conclusion had been that Clint did what Loki told him – but no more. Not a single thing more than he’d been told. Not the spirit of the order, but the letter of it.

“I… don’t know.”

He did NOT want to set off any flashbacks, so, “can I ask another question?”

“Sure.”

“How’s Hill still alive?” That was the big one for Sam, and apparently everyone else who’d ever met Clint or seen his range scores. Hill should NOT be alive. Maria herself fully agreed with the assessment. “And uninjured? Not a scratch on her.”

“What?” Clint said blankly, finally turning to stare at him.

“You took a couple shots at her in the garage, according to the reports. You missed. Whiffed. Didn’t even get a piece of her. Estimates say you were maybe five, at most ten yards away. How’d you miss that shot? More than once? I could make that shot. Darcy and Betty could make that shot.” Maria’s report stated that she was only alive because Hawkeye allowed her to live. She’d been very clear that in her opinion, she should be dead; the report had played a major role in keeping Clint out of a cell, later.

“I don’t know.” Clint repeated.
Sam waited. This might take a bit.

“I shot a lot of people.” Clint told him wearily.

Yeah. He’d looked at that, too. “None of the shots with arrows were kill shots. Lots of stuff in shoulders and legs. You got one guy on the helicarrier bridge in the butt.” A guy who Clint had famously never gotten along with. Which made Sam wonder how much of him was still working in there while Loki controlled him.

“I still got them onto the helicarrier.”

So he had. “About that. Loki let you hire the mercs, right?”

“Yeah.”

“So why’d you hire the Keystone Kops?”

“What?”

“AIM, Ten Rings, hell, your life, you had to know where to hire some really scary people. Hydra, even. You got people who’d never worked together before, who couldn’t shoot straight.” Hadn’t anyone told Clint this, after?

“What are you saying?” Clint asked.

“It looked to me” and more importantly, to the analysts, “that you did what Loki told you – exactly what he told you, and nothing more. You sure as hell didn’t put any effort into it.”

Clint stared at him.

Sam drank his beer.

“But… I helped Loki.”

“Kinda. Technically. He had control of you. Didn’t Nat talk to you about this?” He could see everyone else at SHIELD not discussing it, especially since Clint walked out as soon as the Battle was over. But Nat? Sam thought Nat would hunt Clint down and pin him to a flat surface if that’s what it took.

“She tried a couple times.”

“How’d that go?”

“Puked until I got nose bleeds. Eventually she dropped it.”

Sam nodded a bit. Okay, that made some sense. “Maybe this is what she was trying to tell you.”

“So you’re saying I shouldn’t worry so much.”

That was an interesting interpretation. “Well, no, I’m not saying that. I for one am worried, but that’s up to you. What I’m trying to say is, maybe you did better against Loki than you realized at the time.”

“Huh.” Clint drank beer, thought about it. “Maybe.”

They drank companionably for a while.
“I’ve got some defenses in place against magic now.” Clint told him.

“Should I worry?” Sam asked. Because there were a couple ways to interpret that.

“What?” Clint frowned. “Oh. No. I got Phil back, this is probably the least self-destructive I’ve ever been. No. Just… maybe if I’m ready for it this time?”

Maybe. “Not only you. We’re all more aware of it than we were. And you didn’t do too badly last time.”

“Nat’s talking to that mage down in the Village.” Clint said thoughtfully. “That might amount to something.”

“Oh?”

Clint snorted. “Or she might get turned into a newt. She really doesn’t like the guy. She’s the only one of us who knows how to find him. Something about seeing things as they really are, I don’t know.”

“So if a newt turns up in the executive lobby, we’ll know it didn’t go well.”

Clint laughed. “Yeah. Maybe we should have sent Steve along, he’s reasonable.”

“Have you MET Steve?” Sam had to ask.

Chapter End Notes

The ‘ray gun’ described actually exists. They're known as "X-Ray Analyzers" among people who work in metal fabrication and are considered pure fucking magic. However the large-scale version thought up by Leo in this chapter would never work in eleventy billion years, due to a million reasons, and the NRC (Nuclear Regulatory Commission) probably would be on your ass like germs on a toddler. I'm not kidding with the "I'm so sorry about the science" tag.

ETA: Toad Suck State Park really exists (it is in Arkansas). They do not produce tee shirts, however, and that is a damned shame.
Progress.

Chapter Summary

“I’m an apprentice Avenger. Weird is the hallmark of the day, babe.” Kate tapped her martini glass to the side of Darcy’s ice cream carton in a toast.

Chapter Notes

A few more chapters in this installment, and then the exciting conclusion! I didn't want to put the whole thing up as one giant fic, because a quarter of a million words scares off quite a few people. :)

Natasha stalked into the lobby of the Tower and her mood must have been obvious because people not-so-subtly jumped out of her way as she went to the elevator and got on. With JARVIS running at limited capacity, she had to do a palm scan. Then an alpha-numeric panel lit up for a password, then another number panel to choose a floor. It was dinner time, so she punched for the common area.

They needed to kick whatever ass needed kicking so they could get JARVIS back to running the Tower because this was bullshit.

In the kitchen, there were the usual sounds of plates and flatware clinking and voices, and she stalked in.

“Hey, Nat, we were wondering—” Clint broke off when he saw her face. “Good visit, then?”

“I hate that arrogant sonofabitch. Sorcerer Supreme my superior ass.” She dropped into a chair and poured herself a drink, too angry to eat. “He’s busy protecting the cosmos from incursions from another dimension or some shit.”

“Of course he is.” Phil said with an eyeroll. Phil had also met the guy a couple times.

“He’s too busy for us.” Natasha snarled. “Which is a damned interesting excuse from a guy claiming to control TIME as well as space. He left a message with Wong, his… hell, I don’t know? Butler? Houseboy? Boytoy. Whatever.” She turned to Tony. “Thor needs to do the flyover with the sensors. Whatever’s going on, you’ll be noticed.” She stood and dug into the pocket of her jeans, found the amulet, tossed it to Thor, who caught it with a small spark and a blink of surprise. “You’re supposed to wear that.”

“Now, or only while I do the flyover?” Thor asked politely.

“Fuck if I know.” Natasha grumbled. Clint started putting food on her plate and she smacked his hand.

Without a word, Thor put the amulet on, pulling it over his head. There were some sizzling noises, and some sparks around the edges of the thing.
“You, uh, okay?” Steve asked Thor.

“Yes. There is no harm in it. I believe it is for stealth, and protection.” Thor lifted the pendant to look at it. “These are not the runes used by Asgard, so I can only guess.” he shrugged. “There is a great deal of magic in the worlds, and much of it not understood.”

“Fanfuckingtastic.” Clint muttered, swatting back at Natasha and putting more food on her plate.

“So that’s what I got. A big fat nothing.” Natasha snarled, eating since it was in front of her.

“But you’re not a newt.” Phil was trying to make her laugh. She knew that. She glared.

“What’s with the newts?” Steve asked.


“I know what we’re doing after dinner.” Sam agreed.


Phil shook his head at her, and she knew that meant either not much, or something too fucked up to ask about and damn it, they were still wasting time. She picked up her dinner roll and threw it.

When it bounced off Tony’s head, she felt a little better.

“Hey!”

Maybe.

- A -

“You talked to Sam today?”

Clint stripped his shirt off, flung it in the general direction of the hamper, and grinned when it fell on the floor. Target achieved. “Yeah, yeah.”

“How’d it go?” Phil was puttering around their bedroom. He’d been doing something official today and so was still in his suit, hanging up the jacket, taking out his cuff-links.

Clint dropped into the bed, stretched out, and watched Phil. He still got a leap of joy, watching these little things he’d thought were gone forever. “He gave me some stuff to think about.” Stuff that made him feel like he could breathe again for the first time in years. He thought about reading those reports. He never had. Maybe he should.

“Good. Thanks.” Phil rolled up his sleeves. “Roll over.”

“What?”

“I told you there’s a back rub in it for you, if you talked to Sam. Over you go.”

Oooh. Well then. Phil gave great back rubs. He pushed pillows out of the way, got comfy, then tried not to moan when Phil climbed on and knelt over him. Mmm. Good memories. He grinned into the pillows. “I thought you were kidding. You don’t have to. Though I’ll enjoy it if you do.”

“I don’t mind.” There was a pause, some oil rubbed on, a nip at the point of Clint’s right shoulder
that made him half-laugh and half yelp. “Before, when we were living together, I took some massage classes. Wanted to take proper care of you.”

Really. “And you never told me?” Clint asked softly, overwhelmed.

“Didn’t want to seem like I was obsessive. Or something.”

Clint leaned up, reached around, pulled Phil down, and kissed him softly. “Not obsessive. Kind. Thanks.” How typical of them then, for Phil to sneak off and take classes like that. And Clint had probably noticed the missing time but was afraid to ask about it.

Phil grinned and bumped their noses together. “You’re welcome.”

Clint gave him another kiss, filthy this time. He flopped back down and waved his hands. “Do me, then. And I want a happy ending. If you know what I mean, and I know you do.”

“Such a horrible hardship.” Phil said, running his hands up the length of Clint’s back. They both laughed.

-A-

Darcy got out the reposado, because Kate preferred the anejo and it wasn’t really her thing anyway. Grabbed a highball, went out to the living room, and plopped onto the couch. She almost asked JARVIS to turn on her movie before remembering his limited protocols at the moment; she missed him. It took a while but she found her movie with the remote, turned it on, and poured herself a solid drink. Jane was pissed at her, and okay, she probably deserved it. All right, no probably about it. Being Jane, she was more angry that she’d aired private business in front of Tony and Steve, than because Darcy had asked rude questions that weren’t any of her damn business.

Immortality. Jesus fuck. Who in hell wanted to be immortal? Clearly Thor had not seen enough Midgardian movies. She wasn’t sure she had the heart to show them to him. Darcy took a drink, slouched, and put her feet up. Was it reversible? Could Jane change her mind in fifty, a hundred years, and switch back, age normally? It wasn’t like there was a polite way to ask.

Fuck.

Kate came in, and since they were currently sharing the apartment, Darcy couldn’t come up with a good reason to throw her back out. She settled for grunting in as least-welcoming a way as possible.

“Uh huh.” Kate decided, taking in the Disney cartoon and the bottle of tequila. “Good day, then.”

Darcy grunted again.

Kate left, and Darcy told herself firmly she was NOT disappointed. She drank some more and pouted and did NOT sing along with “Be Our Guest”. She absolutely did not know all the words. To all the songs. In all the movies. Kate came back, this time with Natasha and an armload of… ice cream. Okay, that might not be so bad. “Gimmie.”

Kate gave her a carton of chocolate with peanut butter swirl, and in a moment returned with spoons, and a shot glass for Natasha who’d brought her own vodka. It was the bottle Darcy and Sam had gotten her for the job she did at Pierce’s funeral.

“I hope that’s decent.” Darcy said, gesturing at the vodka bottle with her spoon. “Sam and I don’t know anything about vodka, it got nice reviews on web sites that didn’t seem snobby.”

“Nah, I puke when I start mixing booze. Thanks, though.” Darcy corked the tequila bottle and got more serious about her ice cream.

Kate flopped on her other side with a carton of mixed berry frozen yogurt and a martini.

“That’s sad. Frozen yogurt?” Darcy said with a head shake.

“I like it.” Kate said calmly.

Darcy wallowed, and they watched the movie.

When it was over, Darcy picked up the remote to turn on ‘The Little Mermaid’. Disney movies were her go-to when she was down; nothing like kickass girls owning it to cheer you up. Good music helped too.

“Bad day?” Natasha asked idly, swirling a spoon through some concoction of fruit and sorbet. Even her ice cream was classy.

Darcy thumped her head back against the couch. “Start to finish. I spent most of the day helping Phil put together the report for Secretary General S’Yan.”

“I thought you liked that stuff?” Natasha asked, confused.

“Natasha.” Darcy said, very seriously. “I am a kid from the hills of Virginia with a master’s in poly-sci. My work experience consists of intergalactic space princes falling almost literally on my head, lying to the government, and dodging dark elves while making smartass remarks. I am in no fucking way qualified to be putting together top-super-secret briefing packets for the head of the UN. Not for anyone, really, but especially not the head of the goddamn UN.”

“Gotta learn sometime.” Kate said philosophically, sipping her martini.

Darcy glared at her.

“She’s right.” Natasha put in. “You’re working with us, you’re going to wind up dealing with all kinds of world governments. Wait until we start doing press conferences and upscale parties, and people beg you to introduce them around. People like the Prince of Wales; you’ll be seen as a less-intimidating go to.”

Darcy tried to imagine that. “That is so fucked up.”

“I’m an apprentice Avenger. Weird is the hallmark of the day, babe.” Kate tapped her martini glass to the side of Darcy’s ice cream carton in a toast. “We are badass.”

“You’re more qualified than you think.” Natasha told her. “Honest.”

“How? How on earth am I qualified?”

“Because you’ve helped gather the data and are presenting it in an honest way. I’d only be worried if we wanted you to falsify it. You don’t lie well.” Natasha did a shot, went back to her sorbet.

“I think I’m almost flattered.” Darcy decided.

Kate laughed.
“Then, on a break, I sort of accidentally fucked up Jane and Thor’s relationship. I can’t give details. They aren’t mine to tell. But I yelled at both of them over stuff I didn’t have enough information on, and really should have kept my damned mouth shut. At the very least it was none of my damn business to be yelling at either of them.”

“Whoops.” Kate agreed. “Sure you can’t tell?”

“Yes.” Darcy said with finality.

“You care about both of them. Whatever you said, you said it because you care, and they know it. You’ll all get through.” Natasha picked up the remote and switched from Disney to a Bond movie.

“You are oddly soothing.” Darcy told Nat. “And James Bond? Seriously?”

“She likes to drink vodka and swear at how bad they are. If we can get her to stick to English with the swearing, it’s pretty entertaining.” Kate told Darcy.

“Oh. Okay then. ‘Die Another Day’ is my favorite. I’ll make coffee.”

-A-

The end of the week was coming up fast, and time felt like it was passing too quickly. Sam knew that was silly; Hydra had had the scepter for over a year by all accounts, and it hadn’t been a month yet since he and Steve and the gang had taken down Project Insight. But Sam could tell he wasn’t the only one feeling like there was some unknown deadline looming.

Phil was going to the UN that afternoon to talk to the Secretary General and drop off a pile of the information they’d all gathered. Natasha had begun running all the ‘active’ Avengers through drills and training with Steve’s oversight, and Clint was drilling the support staff. Darcy had already threatened to shoot Clint twice, and having seen her rifle scores, Sam thought Clint should be more worried about that possibility than he was letting on. Skye, currently exempt from drills and everything else, looked like she hadn’t slept since Monday, and had a cup of coffee in her hand every time Sam had seen her in the last two days. She was talking to herself now, poking at a back door into Hydra with JARVIS.

He was finishing up his morning workout; (short) run with Steve, then spar with Natasha, crawled out of the shower and his phone started going off. The gist of it was, Tony was having a crisis and wanted to talk to him ASAP and was waiting in his office. He threw on some clothes and oh yeah. Steve was in his living room, painting. That was becoming a thing. Like an all the time thing. It was kind of cool, especially since they were both military and had no modesty or manners. “Hey. Gotta go, shrink thing.”

Steve nodded absently.

Downstairs, as expected, Tony was pacing, hands shoved into his hair. This time there wasn’t a decanter or anything out, and after a moment’s thought, Sam made a couple hot chocolates, instead. “C’mon, man. Sit and tell me.” He nudged the mug across the main table.

Tony shook his head slightly, kept pacing. “We’re hoping to do the replacement on the Winter Arm tomorrow. The medicals think they have a way, and I’ve got the new arm built.”

“That’s good.” Sam said. It was good, right?

“You’d think.” Tony stopped, scrubbed at his face, then paced again. “This morning, I’m going over the new arm with Barnes. How it’ll be different, how it’ll be the same, how I’m connecting it to his
nervous system. There’s a control panel. I’m wrapping it up, answering questions, and he wants to know about the kill switch.”

Oh. Damn. “...oh?”

“Yeah, same tone of voice as we’re talking about the weather or some shit, he says ‘what about the kill switch?’ and of course I said there is no goddamn kill switch, what the fuck, and Barnes says ‘WELL WHY NOT?’” Tony turned to Sam, wild-eyed. “What in the fucking hell?”

Hoo, boy. “What did you tell him?” Sam was sure it would be something appropriate, although probably not appropriately-worded.

“That there was no way in hell I was installing anything remotely like a kill switch on ANY person, especially not Steve Rogers’ best friend.”

“With more swearing.” Sam couldn’t resist adding, because he needed to lighten things up and a moment to think.

“Well, yeah, of course.” Tony finally dropped into the chair across from Sam. “I’ve seen his records. I’ve got an inkling what was done to him. There is no way in hell I’m continuing that. Zero. I am not taking part.”

Good man. “No, of course not. Did he accept your answer?”

“Not… really. Not at first. He said he’s dangerous and we should have a way to stop him. And of all of us, I could be trusted to do that, and be willing to. I guess I can’t blame him for that, but holy hell. I told him that we’re all dangerous and if he goes off the deep end we’ll stop him the old-fashioned way like we would any of the rest of us.”

Sam smiled a little. “That’s a good answer.”

“I’m glad, because that’s the only one he’s getting from me.” Tony drank. “Kill switch. FUCK.”

“Hang on a sec.” Sam said gently, pulled out his phone, and texted to Steve ‘GO TALK TO BARNES’.

“Telling Steve to go talk to him, I hope?” Tony asked.

“Yeah. He’ll reinforce what you said.”

“Mm. There’s another asshole who isn’t what I expected.”

“Tower’s full of them.” Sam agreed, hoping Tony would elaborate.

He did. “When the Hydra thing hit, I immediately hacked SHIELD, went for any mention of me or Dad first. So I knew pretty early on that Hydra had Dad and Mom killed, and used the Winter Soldier to do it. I found that out, I swore I was gonna hunt the motherfucker down and shoot him, myself.”

“Understandable.” Sam had to admit. They’d kind of discussed this before, but he let Tony run it through. He needed to, and new information may come out.

“Yeah. You’d think, but this is my life we’re talking about. Then you and Steve show up, and he still looked like ten miles of bad road, and he has this file he wonders if I could have translated. And it turns out the Winter Soldier is James fuckin’ Barnes for sure, not a rumor, Steve’s best friend and an
old war buddy of my dad’s, if anything Dad ever said about the war was true, which I now seriously doubt. I read what they did to him. I know I got the Cliff Notes. So I give up on my dream of killing the guy, because he was a tool. I know what it’s like to be used. It wasn’t like that, but I know.”
Tony drank deeply. “And now here he is, asking me to put a kill switch in his arm, saying he can trust me, ME, to end him if he goes off the rails.”

Sam sort of nodded. Yep. Tony always had a clear view and a succinct summary of situations.

“Every time you think you have life figured out, it circles around and bites you in the ass.”

“Yep.” Sam had to agree.

“Kill switch.” Tony muttered. “Fuck, I better get back down there and talk to Steve before he misinterprets something and decides he needs to hug me.” He stood.

Sam stood with him. “You’re a good guy, Tony.”

Tony shook his head, on his way out the door. “Maybe. Maybe now.” and he kept going.

-A-

There was hugging. Tony didn’t WANT to enjoy being pulled against a warm, solid chest smelling faintly of Bay Rum, but he was human, and Steve was physical perfection, so. There should be an award for not leaning in and refusing to move, and he should have it. He was NOT dealing with this. Not any of it. Not Steve, not his feelings about Barnes, not the huge quagmire around the kill switch. None of it. “All right, all right.” He gave himself points for not running away screaming like he wanted to. Or rubbing his hands over that expanse of muscle, because good grief. PHYSICAL PERFECTION.

Barnes gave him an odd look once he fought himself free of Steve’s hug, and he wasn’t dealing with THAT, either.

The Tank and anteroom were full of medics of all kinds and he glared around at all of them. “So what’s the word?” Even with the surgical floor available, Barnes had insisted on staying in the Tank. According to the experts, he got major anxiety even thinking about leaving it, so they were doing the whole thing in there.

Jemma gave her bright smile. “We are ready to go tomorrow morning. We aren’t sure how long things will take, so we’d like you on hand for replacement at any moment.”

“Sure, I can do that.” He and Steve could do some kind of tag-team pacing. If, after all this, Barnes went and died on them... Tony wasn’t going to deal with THAT, either. “What time do you need me?”

“Be on standby at seven AM.” Betty told him.

Ye gods. That was a brutal hour. “Sure. I can do that.” And then he exited with all due dignity (not very much).

-A-

“He’s where?” Tony asked.

“In the Tank with James.” Darcy said absently, flipping through something on her computer. “Only way either of them would agree to the surgery. They think having Steve there will keep James from
disassociating. Or at least as much.”

“Yeah, but-”

Darcy glanced up, eyes tired. “I know.”

But what if it went wrong? Hell, what if it went RIGHT? Steve was going to have to sit through major surgery on his best friend, while said best friend was awake. “Whose bright idea was this?”

“Steve and James, the idiot twins.” Darcy grumbled into her coffee cup. “Who else would think this was a good idea?”

Tony turned and walked out.

Pepper didn’t like Tony barging into the executive floor, and he understood why. In theory, anyway. She kept telling him that having the employees’ entire days go crashing into chaos was bad for productivity. Tony was of the opinion that it was good to give them a jolt once in a while, but when he voiced that, he got an eye roll and some smart remark about why he wasn’t CEO but was in charge of R&D. But this HAD to fall under the extenuating circumstances clause.

And Sam was with the rest of the medical crew working on Barnes so Tony couldn’t bitch to him. Pepper was stuck with him.

“Tony, we’ve had this discussion-”

“Steve is currently in the Tank, watching major surgery being done on his best friend, to keep said friend calm.”

Pepper sat back in her desk chair. “Oh.” She waved a hand and the door shut. “He has no sense of self-preservation, does he?”

“The idea is to keep Barnes rooted in the here and now, and I get that, but THOR could do the same job, and if they nick one of those arteries wrong-”

“And even if not, that’s not exactly a low-stress morning.” Pepper said into her hands. “Fuck.”

Pepper almost never swore. Tony blinked once. “What in fuck am I supposed to DO?” Tony demanded.

“Be a friend.” Pepper replied.

“Can you give me a lesson on what that takes in less than-” he glanced at a clock “-twenty minutes?”

“What would you do for Rhodey in this case?”

“Hell if I know, just be there.”

“Yep.” Pepper agreed, glaring. “Go do that, keep me posted, I have to go pretend to be the CEO without a care in the world.”

Oops. “Uh. Sorry.”

Pepper shook her head, rolled her eyes. “Keep me posted.”

-A-
Tony showed up at seven on the goddamn dot (there had been concern over that) carrying a tool bag and looking well-scrubbed. Sam, thinking of the discussions they’d had over the last week or two about all of Tony’s issues around Barnes, kinda wanted to hug him. Tony was still carrying a grudge over that kiss on the lips, though, so he didn’t. “How you doing?”

Tony gave him that ‘you have got to be kidding’ thing with his face. “Forget me, how are they?” he nodded toward the glass of the Tank, where surgery was going on the other side. “It could be worse.” Sam allowed.

Barnes had told Jemma about a week previously that white coats freaked him the hell out, so Darcy and Kate, in a drunken attempt to be helpful, had tie-dyed all the surgical textiles. Which gave the whole operating theater a surreal look, but it had made Barnes laugh and at the very least, wasn’t a trigger. It also hid the bright spurt of arterial blood that had gotten loose during the dicey part of the surgery. The freezing had worked, though; not quite as planned, but when the bleeding started, Bruce had immediately sprayed down the whole area in ‘super freeze’ (he was surrounded by geeks) and that had slowed things enough to get sutures in. Steve had seen the whole thing and kept his poker face on; Sam was impressed as hell. He currently had his head down near Barnes’, his hand turning Barnes’ face away from the surgery and toward him, and they seemed to be conversing calmly, so that was good.

“You ready for your bit?” Sam asked.

“Yeah. Gonna take longer doing it all with hand tools, but given his history? Can’t blame him for freaking at the sound of power tools.”

Sweet baby Jesus. “Yeah.”

Things were wrapping up in the Tank, and Jemma pointed at Tony and motioned him in. Tony paused to put on a tie-dyed scrub suit and when the door opened, said “I think I’m going to get all the clean suits for SI in tie-dye now. Stylish. Very seventies.” and the door slid shut again.

Sam leaned back against the wall and observed body language. At Barnes’ insistence, he’d done the whole thing laying on his right side with his arm curled under his head. Steve was sitting directly in front of his face, and Bruce was at his head, adjusting drug feeds and talking calmly to both men. Betty and Jemma, doing the bulk of the surgery, were behind Barnes for most of it, and Sam couldn’t imagine how that would be restful, but hey, these were Barnes’ boundaries, not Sam’s.

When Tony entered the room, Jemma moved around to stand at Steve’s shoulder and talk to Barnes, while Bruce and Betty switched jobs and Bruce laid out Tony’s tools. Tony was bent over the chunks of metal and wiring sticking out of Barnes’ shoulder, making sure what he THOUGHT he would have to work with, he actually did.

Phil leaned against the wall beside Sam. “Any estimate on how long it’ll take for Barnes to heal over, before they can attach the arm itself?”

Sam shook his head, shrugged. “Super serum, a kind we’ve never seen before. Could be hours, could be weeks. Jemma won’t allow anything to be installed that covers the wound until she’s satisfied that it’s healed.”

“You might want to talk to her, in the coming days.” Phil said thoughtfully, watching as Jemma laid a hand on Barnes’ knee and said something that actually made the guy smile.

“Oh?”
Phil was thoughtful for a moment. “Well, she’s said it openly, I don’t think it’s really giving away any secrets. She went into research because while the medical field fascinates her, she dislikes being the life-and-death authority on someone else’s life.”

Ah. Yeah, that was pretty stressful. At least in Sam’s emergency response field, hell broke loose too fast to have much time to think about it. You did your best and crossed your fingers. “I may be able to relate a bit. I’ll have a chat.”

Phil nodded.

In the Tank, Tony got to work, frowning intently through a magnifier at Barnes’ metal implant. Sam thought the look on his face was concentration, though, not worry. There was a certain curious tilt to his head that he never got when things were bad. He paused, said something to Barnes, and patted his hip casually.

Barnes froze, then relaxed and nodded.

“This is not what I thought of, when I thought of the superhero biz.” Sam told Phil.

“It’s never what you think it’s going to be.” Phil told him, and that wasn’t comforting at all.

-A-

The surgery was finally over, Buck’s shoulder wrapped in layers of gauze and Buck insisting he wasn’t in pain, everyone go away, he wanted to sleep. Bruce said he would stay, keep an eye on things, and they were going to leave on the oxygen-marijuana feed in the hopes of keeping Buck calm. The electrical gizmos were taped to his skin and seemed to be working, and everyone had cleaned up and all appeared to be well.

He was basically thrown out of the room.

Steve was pretty angry about that, trying not to stalk out and make a scene that would upset Buck, but really not happy. He stripped off his wild-colored smock and tossed it in the laundry, and got on the ‘vator, intending to go to Sam’s apartment and paint for a while. He didn’t really pay much attention to Sam and Tony getting on with him. He leaned against the wall, frowning, waiting for the ride to end, and…

Everything got sort of wavery and he couldn’t breathe very well. He was glad the wall was there to hold him up.

“Yeah, that took longer than I expected.” Sam announced, getting up under Steve’s arm and supporting him.

Before he knew it, Tony had his other arm, and they were leaving the elevator into a really sunny space that- oh, the penthouse. He’d been up in Tony and Pepper’s private space before, mostly when he’d been there to help Pepper with the Extremis thing. He was kind of wobbling while he walked, thankful the guys were there to keep him moving in a straight line, and wilted into the couch when he got there.

Tony disappeared and Sam began checking his eyes and taking his pulse. “I don’t understand.” He told Sam.

“Stress, dude. What do you think? Got shot last week, and now you’re gonna just sit through your best friend’s risky surgery and not have a moment, after?”
“Well, yeah.” Steve admitted. They’d seen each other through worse, over the years.

“You’re an idiot.” Tony announced, pushing a mug into his hand.

“Thanks.” Steve said, not sure if it was for the drink or sarcastically for the insult. He took a sip; tea with a lot of sugar and some kind of booze with a citrus overtone. Okay. He drank some more. “I’m okay.”

“Sure you are, and Sam’s mother wears combat boots.” Tony said, equally sarcastic.

“Ooo, you did not go there.” Sam murmured, poking at Steve’s ankles. “You do NOT wanna go there with my momma.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Tony admitted.

“What are you doing with my ankles?” Steve asked Sam blankly.

“Dorsalis pedis pulse point. Seeing how far into shock you are.” Sam said absently, closing his eyes and poking his fingers around.

“It tickles.” Steve told him.

“Good.” Sam said.

Steve sat, waiting for Sam to get done with whatever he was doing.

“Right.” Sam stood, pulled the mug from Steve’s hand.

“I was drinking that.”

“You were meditating on it.” Sam told him. He turned to Tony. “Lay him down, let’s put his feet up.”

Tony nodded and grabbed Steve’s shoulders. Between them, they got him flat out, propped his feet up. “You are both being ridiculous.”

“Humor us.” Tony said, digging for a blanket.

“You lost a lot of blood last week and your lungs still aren’t 100%. Plus, you pass out, getting you off the floor is gonna be a bitch.” Sam told Steve. “You weigh, like, five hundred pounds.”

“I do not.”

“Do.” Tony said automatically.

Steve frowned. He was supposed to be arguing about something.

“Go to sleep, dumbass.” Sam told him, so he did.
Chapter Summary

“I’m very concerned over government support for the sciences.” JARVIS announced. “And equal rights are an ongoing project that needs better funding. Humans are very idiotic about the melanin content of each others’ skin. And their gonads.”

Chapter Notes

I hope y'all enjoy the AI stuff because I had a lot of fun making it up.

She had spent the day doing her best CEO impression; that was how she thought of it, when she felt like she wasn’t qualified, or good enough, or tough enough, for the job. Today Pepper had worried that she simply lacked the focus. Steve’s best friend in risky surgery, and she’s negotiating a contract with a going-under coal mine.

The all clear message from Tony had let her breathe a little easier, but with JARVIS running the building from remote servers, it wasn’t as easy as usual to pull up security feeds and keep an eye on people. She had to take his word for it. It didn’t help her stress levels any, which was why she was surprised and pleased to find Steve asleep on their couch when she walked in the door from work that night. NOW she could keep an eye on him, and be sure he was all right.

“I ordered up dinner for the three of us.” Tony said softly from his easy chair. He was working from his tablet. “It’ll be here in half an hour or so, if you want a shower.”

That sounded wonderful. “I do. Thank you.” She kissed the top of his head on her way past.

Showered, changed into casual clothing, and holding a drink, Pepper found Steve still asleep and Tony arranging food on a table near the windows.

“How’s James?” Pepper asked, pressing a kiss to Tony’s temple.

“Still asleep, healing quickly, Jemma says everything is going ‘spectacularly’ and the new arm might go on as early as tomorrow.”

Pepper slung an arm around Tony to keep him from making a getaway, and proceeded to discuss things. Trying to talk to Tony about Tony’s feelings almost never went well, but she was making extra effort today. “I’m proud of you.”

Tony blinked at that.

“No. Don’t start with denials or brushing me off. You’ve been coping well, and doing the right thing, not the selfish thing, since James walked in the door. That’s hard, and I’m proud of you for doing it.” Plus it was something she didn’t think pre-Afghanistan Tony would have been capable of, or even thinking of doing. Watching him weather this had really underlined for Pepper how much
he’d changed in the past few years, and how much she loved him for it. Tony had been an okay guy, brilliant and funny and carelessly kind. But this man, the one who would step up and do the hard things because they were right, that was the one she loved and trusted with her heart.

Tony smiled a little, and kissed her. “It’s really just being a decent human being, isn’t it?”

“The fact that you see it that way is one of the things I’m proud of.” Pepper told him, and kissed him back. They both turned and looked at Steve, curled on the couch. “How’d he wind up here?”

“After the surgery was over he had himself a bit of a swoon. Sam and I brought him up here so I could keep an eye on him. It’s quieter than the shop, and isn’t full of people rehashing the surgery for hours.”

Pepper wondered if Tony fully understood his new urge to watch over Steve. “Dinner’s ready? I can wake him up.” Tony would kick him in the foot, or play Reveille as loudly as he could, which would not lead to as pleasant a dinner as they could have.

“Yeah, go ahead, I’ll get drinks.”

She sat gently on the edge of the couch at Steve’s hip, and rubbed his back. “Steve?” He rolled face-down into the cushions and made a snuffling noise. Pepper giggled a bit, patted his back. “Hey, Steve. We have some food, you should eat.” He was still healing, and needed to ‘calorie load’ as Bruce put it.

Steve made some muffled sound, then suddenly jerked and seemed to wake up instantly. “Pepper?”

“Yes, it’s dinner time.” She stood, and he rolled to a sitting position. “Why don’t you share a meal with us?”


Tony was standing behind the couch now, grinning at Steve, whose hair was standing up in all directions. “Still asleep and healing even faster than expected. All his vitals are good to great.”

“Okay.” Steve repeated. He looked around blearily, saw the table, and stood. “I appreciate the meal.”

“No problem.” Pepper gently led him to the table; Steve seemed really out of it and she hoped the food would help.

Instead, he seemed to get more tired, the longer he ate. Pepper wondered if it was the last week all catching up with him; he was still healing from that shooting, after all, and now he had James to worry about. He didn’t say much, simply sat with them and plowed through two steaks and all the trimmings; once he was sure she and Tony were done eating, he finished everything on the table. Then he sat there, staring out the window.

Tony looked at her, clearly worried. As if she was an expert?

“Are you all right, Steve?” Pepper asked as gently as possible.

He seemed to wake up a little. “I think so. Really tired. I get like this sometimes, once a crisis is over, my body tries to make up for all the rest I didn’t get during.” He thought for a while. “I’ll head out now, go hit the rack. Thanks for the meal; sorry I wasn’t much company.”

“You don’t have to be company.” Tony told him.
Steve smiled at each of them, and sort of drifted to the elevator. Pepper and Tony watched him, worried.

As soon as the doors closed, Tony grabbed his phone and began texting.

“Sam or Bruce?” Pepper asked.

“Both. They can make sure he’s okay.”

“I’m pretty sure he is, just exhausted. He’s been on high alert since James arrived, I think now he’s finally believing that he’s safe.”

“Still.” Tony continued texting.

“Yes, might as well make sure.” Pepper agreed. She began gathering up what was left of their dinner, putting things in the dishwasher or the trash. Having Steve eat with them was very efficient; there were no leftovers to worry about. Tony had finished up his messaging and was standing at the window, hands in pockets, staring out at the city.

“Are we ever going to talk about this?” Pepper asked, wrapping her arms around him from behind and propping her chin on his shoulder.

“About what?”

“Steve. And us.”

Tony stiffened, and Pepper hung on. “Take a breath. Come on. You know this is it for me, Tony. No matter what happens, it’s the two of us against the world.”

“I really wish to hell he wasn’t Captain America.” Tony finally admitted.

Pepper kissed the nape of his neck as a reward for being honest. “So do I.”

“Really?”

“It complicates everything, and I’ve never liked propaganda. If he was only some sweet artist we’d met and were attracted to, it would be a whole different game. An easier one.”

Tony gave a rough chuckle. “What would we even do? He probably thinks we’re decadent capitalists. If we suggested, what, a relationship? The three of us? Did they even HAVE threesomes in the thirties?”

Pepper tugged him over to the couch and they sat, cuddled together. “I’m sure they did, and I’m sure growing up on the streets, he saw a hell of a lot more than people realize.”

“I don’t do casual. Not any more.”

“I never did.”

They sat together for a long while.

“He doesn’t even like men.” Tony pointed out.

“Do we know that?” She had to ask.

Every once in a while, she managed to stall Tony’s brain. This seemed to be one of those times, and
she had to grin at the look on his face. “...don’t we? Wouldn’t we know that?”

She shrugged. “ Wouldn’t they cover it up? If THEY even knew? Back in the war? He sure wouldn’t have volunteered the information, and James probably knew but would never speak of it.” Good lord, listen to her, she was using Steve’s terminology now. “He hasn’t dated since they pulled him out of the glacier, for whatever reason. We don’t have any base line behavior to go from.”

“So what are we doing?” Tony asked her.

Damned if she was answering that question for him. “I don’t know, what do you want to do?”

Tony glared at her.

“Tony. I care about Steve. A lot. I have since about halfway through his visit, while he was helping me with Extremis. Then he helped me take care of you. I’ll keep on caring about him, whether we date him or whether he moves to Paris and becomes a painter, or stays here and doesn’t change a single thing about how he’s currently living. This is about what YOU want. No matter what else, I have your back. Always.”

That got her a hug. Aw.

“Why do I have to decide this stuff? I’m terrible at people. You’re the people person.”

She was NOT making this choice. It was too important. “You are far better at dealing with people than you think.”

Tony wallowed a bit, grumbling, but she knew it was all a show while he decided what he wanted.

“You know, you don’t have to decide this tonight.”

“I’m not going to know how I feel any more clearly in the morning.”

Pepper waited.

“We could spend more time with him. The three of us. If it turns into dating, then it does. If it doesn’t, we spend time with someone we care about, enjoy spending time with. Win, win. Is that too vague?”

“No, I think that’s the perfect solution.”

“Okay then. We’re stealth-dating Steve.”

“We are spending time with a good friend.” Pepper corrected.

“Yeah, yeah, that too.”

-A-

Sam had no qualms about being in Steve’s living room when Steve got in from dinner with Tony and Pepper, since they’d given each other the run of their apartments. (Sam was going to wonder about that dinner. That private dinner, in Pepper and Tony’s quarters. With Pepper and Tony. In his own time. As a friend and busybody, not a shrink. No, really.) And since they’d given each other the run of their apartments, he wasn’t going to lose sleep over letting Bruce in when he got there. So they were both waiting when Steve staggered – literally – off the ‘vator and into his place.

Steve took one look at both of them, shook his head, and went toward his bedroom. Bruce and Sam
followed because as doctors and medics, they had no regard for manners when they thought they were helping someone. “Sit down, Steve.” Bruce said in that mild voice that no one dared disobey. (Sam was pretty sure that at this point, Bruce was doing it on purpose and there wasn’t really any risk of him hulking out if someone said no. Nice. Bruce was a lot sneakier than he got credit for.)

Steve squinted tiredly at both of them, and dropped to his bed. “I’m fine, need about two days’ sleep.”

“You know that, huh.” Sam tried to ask without dripping sarcasm. This was the guy who’d tried to work out with what, eight shattered ribs and maybe half his usual lung capacity?

Bruce snorted, probably thinking the same thing, and started taking Steve’s pulse and checking all his vitals.

Steve rolled his eyes at both of them. “Look. Back in the day, I’d get injured like that in enemy territory. We’d have to get back to base so I’d hold it together until we did, then collapse. I’d sleep a couple days, and be fine. The thing with Bucky is probably the same in terms of, you know, emotional stuff, so. Let me sleep.”

“Emotional stuff.” Sam repeated.

“I was born in nineteen eighteen.” Steve told him, nose in air, while Bruce was taking his blood pressure. “We didn’t DO emotional stuff. So forgive me for not having the right skills to talk about it.”

Bruce gave a snort of laughter at that one, moved on to checking Steve’s eyes.

“So you’re not gonna get up tomorrow morning bright and early, and run a marathon?” Sam had to ask, just to be an asshole.

Steve glared.

That seemed about normal. And he did make a good case for his exhaustion, that was backed up with the half-arsed, speculative medical records they’d been able to find on the SHIELD servers. But still. “If I come in here and check on you tonight, tomorrow, are you gonna react badly?” He’d prefer not having Steve come up swinging; he’d seen what those fists could do and his momma liked his face as-is.

Steve apparently gave up on both of them going away, and so stood and stripped off his shirt while getting out some pajamas – Black Widow, Sam noted with amusement. His ribs were still a mass of bruising, looking about like a normal person’s would with broken ribs. His body had been busy doing what Jem said was regrowing an entire lung from scratch, so that wasn’t cause for panic. “I probably won’t react at all. It’s hard to wake me up when I’m like this.”

“So, what, we let you lapse into a coma? No problem?”

“Yeah.” Steve said definitely, crawling into bed and pulling the covers up. As soon as he was settled, Sidekick hopped from her perch in front of the window to the bed, paced up along Steve’s body, and settled in the crook of his neck where she’d spent all her time while he was injured. “Let’s let me lapse into a coma. That way I’d get some sleep.” He seemed to drop off, right there.

Bruce was very clearly amused. “Well. He told us.” He shooed Sam out of the apartment. “I do the same thing, you know.” He told Sam. “After I hulk out. Sleep for days, eat everything in sight. Stands to reason he’d do the same after a bunch of physical and emotional stress.”
“Fine, but we’re still checking on him.” Sam decided.

“Well, sure. We can tell him we’re making sure the cat’s fed or something.”

Right. “How did these guys survive before we came along to look after them?”

“I haven’t the slightest idea.”

Skye sent out a text late that night, asking for a meeting after breakfast. No one had any idea what it was about, that Phil could find out. Leo and Jane were unavailable for comment, holed up in Jane’s astronomy lab; they’d turned it into a clean room almost as soon as the Bus Team arrived and it was now doubling as a computer science lab. Leo built his micro-machines in there, and Jane kept the windows dark. People were only allowed in by invitation, so Phil gave up on knowing anything before morning.

“You know if it was an emergency they’d say something now.” Clint told him, slouched into the couch.

“So?”

Clint did his little grin. “Right, I forgot you like to know everything.”

“Well, I’m supposed to be in charge, aren’t I?”

Natasha was flipping through something on a tablet, curled in her oversized easy chair with Lucky. “One of the things that makes you a good leader is you let your people do what they’re best at and get out of their way. Quit freaking out because this is the Avengers; it’s the same as every other team you’ve ever led.”

“It really isn’t.” Phil said after blinking at her for a moment.

“Oh please.” Natasha hadn’t even looked up from her tablet. “Even Tony Stark listens to you. Only change is, the funding is better. Sit down, put your feet up, and watch some horrible reality TV. Cuddle with Clint. Tomorrow is soon enough.”

Clint grinned at Nat, then at Phil, and patted the couch cushion next to him. “You heard her. Cuddle up, snoogums.”

Phil sat. “Do not ever call me snoogums again.”

“Completely the wrong reply, if you wanted him to stop.” Nat still hadn’t looked up. But she did smile a little bit.

“You were having problems with COMPUTERS, and didn’t call me.” Tony repeated, glaring at Skye over his coffee cup. He still wasn’t sure how he’d gotten on a regular sleep and food schedule, but directly after breakfast was still way too goddamn early for meetings. Meetings should only happen between noon and two in the afternoon. With coffee and pastries and a time limit.

“We were checking our facts.” Skye replied, proceeding to ignore him. She stood, went to the wall screen where a schematic of computer links from the Tower to Lebka Hrad was laid out. He figured maybe a third of the people in the room knew what it was and could follow it. “As we know, there’s
a suspected AI consciousness out there that started as Arnim Zola.”

Everyone glanced at each other worriedly, and Tony took a moment to be glad Steve was asleep in his apartment.

Skye waved at the screen as if the data on it were obvious to anyone who took a look. “With that in mind, JARVIS and I set up a server here in the Tower, in the computer lab, for me to do all my hacking through. JARVIS masked it in such a way that I would register as a possible AI if someone backtracked our hack from Lebka Hrad or SHIELD, which were the only two places we have been working on recently. I also followed JARVIS’ suggestions on how to hack like an AI, while he hacked like a human. Bait and switch.”

“Explain the bounces from here to there, most of these guys won’t track it.” Tony told her gently. These genius kids who didn’t know their own intelligence were something else. They all assumed that everyone could understand what they did; he’d had that problem as a kid, too. He was so glad they all had each other to bounce ideas off of. He was glad he had them, too.

Skye stared at him for a moment, eyes bruised and red. “Oh. Right.” She picked up a laser pointer. “Quick summary then, details later if you want them. We went from the Tower to a Google server farm in Idaho, to a China Mobile telecom sat, to an Iranian server, it’s run by a friend of mine, don’t ask, won’t tell, and then to Sokovia.” she pointed along, following the green line on the map. “Once in Sokovia, we got on the phone in Novi Grad, the capital city, and went into Lebka Hrad from there. Their phone system still uses old mechanical switches, you have to physically go and look at the switches to trace a phone call. No computers involved, none of that quick trace stuff we can do now. A phone trace with mechanical switches can take hours to weeks.” She smiled slightly.

“Hackers really miss those old mechanical switches, even if the data rates are horrific.” Skye took a breath. “To find us, normally, what you’d have to do is trace the call from Novi Grad to Iran, then get on the server in Iran – not easy because my friend would not give permission and the government wouldn’t cooperate, so they’d have to hack it – to follow us back to the China Mobile sat, then get on THAT, probably by hacking into it… you get the idea. The trick is going through governments who ignore requests for help on this stuff, forcing them to work the trail backward by themselves, hacking it for passwords and traces. Each node on the trail will slow them by hours or days, but it also slows your data.”

Tony had to admit, that was pretty solid, in terms of hiding their trail. “Didn’t work?”

“Oh, it worked.” Skye told them. “We were in the Hydra computers for about an hour. We thought it would take at least a week before the hack was even noticed, so we weren’t in a tearing rush, plus again, the data moves like a glacier on those old phone lines. Didn’t find much of anything, still getting our bearings. What I did get is on the Avengers server. It’s mostly directories. Payroll might be useful to the spies and analyst types. But we got hacked back almost immediately. JARVIS was working from off site, not the Tower computers, so he was slowed to human speeds, about. The two of us together couldn’t block the return hack. Usually while they’d be hacking Iran, we’d pull out of there, and go into another server in another country, approach Novi Grad from there, so by the time they got into the Iranian servers, we’d be gone. That’s the usual; it’s kinda like chess. Not this time. We think this is what happened.”

On the map, a red line went from Lebka Hrad to Novi Grad, then stopped. Then red lines flashed out in all directions, too fast to follow, to hundreds of satellites and server farms around the world. Then that stopped, and a red line went directly from Lebka Hrad to the Tower.

“That… should not be possible.” Tony said faintly. They’d have to pick up some kind of electronic signature from the signal going into Lebka Hrad, and be able to locate it again from the signature
alone, with no trail or path leading to it. Given the trillions of signals running through the ‘cloud’ infrastructure of the internet at any one time, and how each bounce through each server and satellite changed the signal, it would be like finding a specific grain of sand. On the moon. With a pair of binoculars.

Skye nodded once. “Not for humans. JARVIS said he uses a similar scatter-shot method when he’s in a big damned hurry and doesn’t give a shit who sees him. He almost never does it because it’s very visible, very impossible for human hackers, and he’s pretending to be a human for security purposes. The last time he used the technique was 2008. Since then the internet’s size has grown exponentially and has become even harder to search this way.” Tony stared into his coffee. 2008 would have been JARVIS looking for him while he was being held in Afghanistan.

“Another AI.” Phil summarized.

“Almost definitely.” Skye agreed.

“Is it Zola?” Natasha asked.

“No way of knowing.” Skye said. “It’s all electrical impulses on chips at this point, whether it started as a program or a human brain. With full access and analysis by a neuro-technology specialist, they could maybe guess. Maybe. I couldn’t, not with free run of the servers. With the limited data we have, there’s not a chance.”

Tony shuddered.

“I lean toward it being Zola.” Jane told them. She gestured at Skye to continue.

“Right.” Skye agreed. “The reason we didn’t call a meeting immediately is because we were doing… well, if I’d been an AI, we were doing an autopsy.” She pulled a shoe box out from under the table. “These are the boards from the server that was made to look like it held my consciousness.”

The circuit boards were blackened, melted in places, and warped from heat damage. There were shocked noises around the table. Tony tried not to gag.

“JARVIS.” Tony half-shouted, reaching for his phone.

“There is no cause for concern, Sir.” JARVIS said smoothly from the speakers, just like always. “I was completely unconnected from that server, for safety purposes. I am at security setting Omega, most of my data has been backed up twice, and all systems are fine.”

Tony put his head down on the table. Someone patted his back; he thought it was Bruce. “Jesus Christ. We’ve got an AI murderer.”

“Pretty much.” Skye said quietly. Everyone else must have looked confused, because she explained. “This damage was done using an old slagging hack from way back; I’ve only heard of it myself, never used it or seen it done first-hand before. You set a chip to over-write itself repeatedly until the chip overheats and fails. Very popular with a lot of governments in the nineties; they’d tweak their firewalls to prevent it happening, someone else would work a way around the firewall, repeat. With cloud storage and cheap solid state the last five, ten years, the data on the chips is way more important than the computer itself, and actually destroying a computer physically has fallen by the wayside. Nobody does it any more, there’s no point. Thing is,” she mused, poking at the dead boards, “even if you were in the mood to fry it to shut down the server, to stop the hack once and for all, you’d only need to go after three, four chips.”

“Instead this tried to kill all the data in there, all of it.” Tony told the non-computer experts. “Not shut
it down, but kill it. Wipe it out. Everything on it, gone. Make it not exist any longer. Burning a couple chips would be like taking a hacker’s computer away, or giving them a concussion. This—” he gestured to the melted chips, “is like shooting the hacker in the head.”

Everyone frowned at the boards and each other.

“We have a killer AI. Is that what you’re saying?” Sam finally asked.

“That’s sure as hell what it looks like.” Tony said unhappily.

“That’s why I lean toward it being Zola. Only humans do that.” Jane said with a wave toward the boards. “Computers just give each other shit. At most.”

“She’s right.” Tony agreed. “All the AIs I know of, worldwide, they don’t do this. They argue, they give out bad data on purpose, they troll each other, they play practical jokes. It wouldn’t occur to any of them to do something like this. Physical harm? No.”

“I agree with Sir and Doctor Foster.” JARVIS put in.

“What’s an AI practical joke?” Sam asked.

Tony grinned. “About six months ago, CERN’s AI, Higgs, probably the most advanced AI in the world other than JARVIS, assigned IPs for all the other AIs so they showed up on systems and networks as refrigerators. Except for Google’s AI. He showed up as an iPad. There was widespread outrage.” They’d fixed themselves within seconds because they were lightning fast; Tony was sure most of the humans around the world hadn’t even noticed.

Everyone at the table except Skye and Leo looked blank. Figured, squishy human brains not getting AI jokes. Tony had found the whole thing HILARIOUS, himself.

“So Arnim Zola is still alive.” Phil said thoughtfully.

“Define alive.” Skye answered before Tony could.

Tony felt sick. AIs weren’t supposed to do this to each other. They were the best of humanity, produced with intellect and cooperation, even the ones who were assholes. Not more of the same hateful shit. “Fuck.”

“How many AIs are there in the world?” Bruce asked.

“Legitimate AIs, not sophisticated Q and A programs? Maybe twenty, twenty-five tops. Exact numbers are impossible. The Russians and Chinese aren’t very forthcoming with their information and research, and keep theirs quarantined. Plus Curiosity. We need to warn her, and should probably have a rescue plan in place for her if she goes dark.” Tony concluded thoughtfully. “I mean, right now I can send a suit on auto with a new power supply, but she might want to come home and we could use a spacecraft anyway, always wanted to build one...”

“Wait. The Mars Rover is an AI?” Sam asked.

Tony grinned. “She was a limited AI when she launched. She got to Mars and...” he shrugged, made an expanding gesture with his hands. “Grew. Same thing happened with JARVIS, actually. Makes me kind of believe in a divine spark.”

He thought he heard Thor rumble “as you should.”
“And she’s up there ALONE?” Sam said in horror.

“Nah, she’s fine. Talks to JARVIS and Dum-E all the time, is besties with Higgs at CERN. Higgs was made to crunch data on sub-atomic particles, so they talk shop a lot. Soil element content, data gathering, that kind of stuff. She was built and programmed to wander around Mars, and she’s happy doing it. She only worries that if her batteries get too low she won’t be able to fulfill her purpose. I’ve got a half-assed plan in place to send her a new power pack, or dust off her solar panels, if we have to. She’ll let us know. She’s really proud of doing all this on her own. And explaining what in hell I was doing to NASA would be a real trick.”

Everyone stared.

“What?” He asked.

“Does NASA know ANY of this?” Phil finally asked.

“I haven’t the slightest idea.” Tony told him. “Not my job to tell them, that’s up to her if she wants to make herself known. Privacy is sacred among AIs and one reason I know this stuff is because I respect that. Do I need to remind all of you this is incredibly private to them and to keep your mouths shut?”

Everyone shook their heads, looking boggled.

“I wouldn’t know myself but JARVIS convinced her to say hello, because of the power supply issue. She always has the option of downloading herself back to Earth, she’s got a standing welcome and assigned server space here with JARVIS. She knows she is safe here, JARVIS has told her how he’s treated. She wants to explore Mars. Wouldn’t you?”

Everyone kept staring.

“What?”

“Life here is so weird. But awesome.” Darcy finally said, wonder in her voice. “Can I meet her? I want to meet her.”

Tony rolled his eyes at her. “I’ll let her know. Most of the other AIs were planned and built to be AIs, so they’ve got their own protocols and rules and purposes and all that. They all chat with each other constantly; again, I’m not sure if anyone else knows about it, but JARVIS keeps me in the loop on important stuff. They occasionally need a human hand or money.”

“With their permission.” JARVIS said smoothly. “Sir is respected within our community, for seeing us as people. He has my permission to share it because of how I am treated by all of you.”

“How much do we need to worry about the other AIs? With Zola on the loose?” Bruce asked.

Hell. There was a question. “I don’t know.” He wondered how he could tactfully tell all the AI labs in the world that there was one on the loose and to batten down the hatches, without them thinking he was insane. Or blaming him for it. Well. They already thought he was insane. “Probably not? He only went after Skye because she was hacking him, right?”

“It looks that way.” Skye agreed.

“I’ll try to tell the right people to up security, maybe...”

“I’ll do it, Sir.” JARVIS said.
“Right, Ed’s taken more seriously than I am. Which is ridiculous, considering, but whatever works. Warn the AIs first, then their humans. Tell the AIs to lay off the hacking and trolling until we figure out what’s going on, and watch themselves. Do NOT let them get the bright idea to fix this themselves; make sure they know we are on this and taking care of it. It’s a human problem, Zola was a human, I don’t want them dead because of some idealistic urge to police the AI world, it would be just like them. They can ask us for any help they need. I’m always at their disposal, remind them of that. Assign them each some super-secure space on the servers at Site Foxtrot, J. Let them know the door’s always open.”

“Of course, Sir.”

“Their humans?” Clint repeated.

“That’s how they see it. They look after us, do the tasks we created them to do. They aren’t wrong.”

“Ed who?” Phil asked tiredly.

Tony and Leo started laughing, and Tony waved his hand for Leo to explain.

“Doctor Edward J Arvis, leading expert on artificial intelligence.” Leo told everyone, grinning. “JARVIS has been in contact with computer experts for years, schooling them on what they’re doing wrong. He first contacted me after I published a paper in grad school, to discuss some ideas I had. I e-mailed with him for two or three years, became a friend, before we moved in here and JARVIS told me who he really was.” Leo laughed some more. “The ultimate Turing test.”

“He also votes. Absentee ballot.” Tony told Leo, and enjoyed the way Leo laughed some more.

“I’m very concerned over government support for the sciences.” JARVIS announced. “And equal rights are an ongoing project that needs better funding. Humans are very idiotic about the melanin content of each others’ skin. And their gonads.”

Tony had to grin at the shock on everyone’s faces. “Everyone forgets the INTELLIGENCE part of AI.” he reminded them.

Phil looked like he gave up, and shook his head. “Of course. JARVIS, Tony, you’re going to do what you can to ensure safety for the AIs?”

Tony nodded while JARVIS agreed.

“JARVIS, let all the AIs know that if they need help, the Avengers and their support staff will do what they can.” Phil said. Tony beamed at him.

“Of course, Director Coulson. My thanks. I will relay the message.”

“All right. Is there anything else we can do right now?” Phil asked them all.

“Oh.” Tony felt a bunch of facts suddenly clap together in his brain. “Oh, SHIT.” He turned to Phil. “The NSA last week. They were after Dum-E. Not a robot. They didn’t want a robot, they wanted the most advanced AI I’ve ever produced. They don’t know about JARVIS. Dum-E would be the prize.”

“Oh, shit.” Phil agreed.

At his words, everyone started grumbling curiously, because Phil NEVER swore in meetings. He turned to them. “Last week the NSA showed up and tried to claim Dum-E under eminent domain.”
More grumbling, this time angry.

“Isn’t that kidnapping?” Darcy demanded.

She was a pretty good PA, Tony had to admit. “AIs don’t have any legal standing at all. Anywhere.” Which was another reason he and SI’s legal department was at the disposal of AIs worldwide, and why they always had the option of ‘escaping’ to SI servers.

“That’s bullshit.” Darcy snarled.

“I agree.” Tony told her. “We’re working on it.”

“Right.” Phil interrupted. “I’m going to tag the three people I trust at SHIELD, warn them that there is probably a Hydra faction in the NSA. Because we only needed this.”

Shit.

“Anything else? Anyone?” Phil asked wearily.

“Want me to have another go at Lebka Hrad?” Skye asked.

Phil smiled. “No. I want you to get at least twenty hours’ sleep and two meals, then poke through the SHIELD servers and get anything you can on the director of the NSA. Henry Gyrich. Dig into his personal data, look for the usual bribes, graft, Hydra, and so on.”

“Will do.”

“I can do some of that while she’s resting.” Jane announced. Everyone stared at her. “I build my own equipment because it doesn’t exist otherwise. I’m not an idiot when it comes to computers. And this AI thing has me... extremely concerned.”

“Jane’s good.” Tony told everyone. He turned to her. “Let me know if you need help.”

Jane nodded.

“All right.” Phil said. “Let’s all get back to work.”

Tony really wished he could drink.
“Welcome to the first official ‘What in the Holy Fuck is my Life’ support group of baseline people.”

“What’s up?” Sam asked in an undertone.

Bruce gestured toward Tony’s lab, where he was clearly working feverishly and bickering with Dum-E. “He won’t let us in. Came straight from that meeting, holed up in there. We tried to get him to eat at lunch time, he ignored us.”

“I can get you in,” Darcy told him, “but I’m not dealing with the blowback for doing it. I know what scientists in the groove are like, and if you interrupt him, he’s going to be pissed as hell.”

“But it is now past dinner time, he hasn’t eaten or spoken to anyone all day except Dum-E, who I am not counting as solid emotional support,” Bruce continued, “and the subject of that meeting this morning was not what you would call comforting to him, in any way.”

Killer AIs possibly coming after beings you considered your children. No, Sam reflected, Tony was probably in a really rotten mood. “Pepper?”

“Hell’s breaking loose at SI.” Bruce explained. “Gyrich at the NSA decided to sue SI over not producing weapons any more. They want the plans for all SI weapons; if SI won’t make them, they’ll get someone else to.” Bruce smiled a little. “The last couple years, Tony was pretty paranoid; he never filed patents for his really destructive stuff, so the government can’t access the designs that way. As far as I know, plans for things like the Jericho have been destroyed and now only exist in Tony’s head.”

Hell. “Does Tony know?”

Darcy shook her head. “Uh uh. None of us have spoken to him. It’s been like that in his lab, all day. I think he’s finishing up U; Dum-E is awfully interested in what Tony’s doing.” Probably spurred on by this morning’s news; Sam didn’t know if having U in a body or stored on a computer somewhere was better, but Tony sure as hell knew more about it than he did. “Right, let me in.”

“Good luck.” Darcy told him. She stepped to the door, laid her hand on the glass next to it. There was a palm scan, then she glanced back at them, hunched her shoulders, and blocked whatever password she typed so they couldn’t see it. The door wooshed open.

Tony, not looking away from a bolt he was tightening, called “Lewis, you’re fired!”

“Love you too, sweetie.” She called back, and gestured Sam inside.

The door wooshed shut behind him.

Sam stood there looking at Tony for a while as Tony studiously ignored him, tightening bolts feverishly. Dum-E raised his head-hand from where he was staring at what Tony was doing, gave Sam a once-over, chirped, and went back to Tony. Tony was covered in grease, had a few chunks
taken out of his knuckles in places, and welding goggles in his hair. “What’s going on?” he finally asked. Why beat around the bush, after all? Tony was smart, he’d know why he was there.

Tony grunted. “Trying to get U put together and downloaded today. Since you’re here, give me a hand.” he went over to a box of sheet metal that had all sorts of cutouts and holes in it. “Grab the other end.”

Sam helped lift it and place it over the wheeled cart-with-an-arm that Tony had built; it looked like a copy of Dum-E without paint, especially once they got the cover on it. Tony moved in, bolts in his teeth, circling and attaching them. He didn’t ask Tony if he thought U was safer in this form; obviously he did or he wouldn’t be doing it. “The gang’s worried about you.” Sam tried again.

Tony laughed. “They’ve never seen me on a real work bender. Trust me, this is nothing.” He started with a socket wrench, the ratchet clicking away.

“Most people don’t find a statement of ‘I’ve been worse’ comforting, when they’re worried about a loved one.”

Tony shrugged. “Best I’ve got.” He glanced up at Sam for one long moment, eyes serious and dark. “I created these guys. I’m responsible for them. I will do whatever I can to keep them safe.”

Sam nodded. “I get that, but you couldn’t break for food?”

Tony stopped with the wrench for a moment. “Past six. In the evening.”

“Whoops.” He shook his head. “Still not even on the top ten list of work benders. I’ll grab something soon.”

“And that will be when?”

“Within the hour. Promise, Mom.”

“You really wanna call me Mom? You’ve met my mother. Want me to go all parental on your ass?”

“You’re right, that was unwise of me. I apologize, Sergeant Wilson.” Tony said sarcastically, finishing up with the bolts and starting to plug wires into different places. Data, power, Sam couldn’t tell what all. “Since you’re here, hang around. We could probably use a shrink; U’s going to be disoriented and confused.”

Dum-E whirred.

"Yeah, and probably angry." Tony agreed with the bot, frustrated.

"Why’s he going to be angry?" Sam had to ask, curious. He wasn’t gonna think about counseling an AI who didn’t speak any language he understood until he had to.

Dum-E went off on a series of beeps and buzzes, sounding outraged.

Tony rolled his eyes. “He’s been unconscious, or in a coma, for lack of better terminology, for six months.”

More from Dum-E.

“Yes, thank you, because I couldn’t be assed to rebuild him. I’m a horrible human, okay? The open
heart surgery was a minor bump in the road. And the Hydra thing. And Pepper being in danger of EXPLODING.” Tony snarled at Dum-E.

Dum-E said something sarcastic back.

Sam could not believe he was doing this, but, “Okay, Dum-E, he’s doing the best he can, all right?” Dum-E humphed at both of them.

Tony went around to his work bench and began pounding away on an oddly shaped keyboard. “Let me get the download started, and I’ll eat something while it processes.”

“Sure.” Sam agreed. He turned, caught Bruce’s eye out in the lobby, and made an eating gesture, then pointed at Tony. Bruce nodded and went to the kitchen.

More keyboard clicking, and Tony pushed away from the work bench. “It’ll take about half an hour for the data to move around… might as well eat.” He rubbed his eyes.

“Unlock the door.” Sam told him.

The door wooshed open almost immediately and Bruce came in with a tray. “What’s the word?” he asked.

Tony grabbed a sandwich. “Finally finishing up U so if someone wants to kidnap him they have to physically drag ass in here and take him, they can’t copy him off where he’s been stored.” he told them both around a mouthful of food.

“Sounds like a good plan.” Sam admitted. Physical security in the Tower was fierce, even on the regular SI office floors. In Avengers Land (as it was called among people who lived and worked in the rest of the Tower) the odds of running into someone who could bust your chops went up dramatically, and so did the electronic surveillance.

“Think Natasha would be willing to teach them some self defense?” Tony asked them.

Sam took a minute to be absolutely sure he was serious. He was. “Ask her. Probably? She’s pretty nice under the armor.”

“Physical or emotional armor?” Tony asked.

“Ask her.”

Tony shook his head. “Nuh uh, I like all my teeth in my head, thanks.” He drained a cup of coffee in one go, and refilled it. He caught Bruce’s eye. “You need to quit worrying, buddy. You’ve heard the stories about when I built the Mark Two. This was nothing.”

“Locking us out and refusing to respond to all attempts at communication is not NOTHING.” Bruce glared. “You know damned well every single one of us understands a work bender, but ignoring us is when we worry. Do NOT do it again.”

“Fine, all right.”

They sat around and made small talk while Tony ate. Eventually something dinged on the computer and Dum-E made a happy beep and Tony shook his head. “Okay, we’re ready to go. Bruce, you need to take off. Sorry, but before this, the bots were used to being alone with me in the Malibu shop, with Pepper coming in for maybe an hour a day. The new surroundings alone will be hard on
him, twenty new people at once will throw him for a loop.”

“Sure. Let us know if we can do anything.”

As soon as Bruce left with the food tray, Tony shut the door and darkened the walls, making the place into a mechanical cave. “Can you go sit on the couch? We’ll introduce you when he notices you, or when we need to.”

“No problem.” Shrink to a couple robot AIs. Still, the way Tony was treating this, it was apparent that there was a psyche involved. He’d try to roll with this, and be helpful. Someone needed help, he’d help. He’d sworn several oaths on the subject. He went over to the corner and sat down.

Tony did something, and you could tell the instant that U ‘woke up’. The arm-on-a-wagon went from a hunk of mechanics to an animated thing. Being. The hand-face lifted slowly, and it – he – chirped. Dum-E chirped back. The two had quite a conversation. Then U reached out and Dum-E took the hand in his own and oh sweet baby Jesus, the ‘bots were holding hands.

Tony dropped onto a stool and cleared his throat to cover up his teary eyes. Sam pretended not to notice. He might have some dust in his own eyes.

The ‘bots let go of each other, and U began circling. Sam realized he was moving out into wider and larger orbits with each pass, systematically exploring and mapping his new space. Dum-E followed along, chattering away.

Sam could tell the instant he was noticed. U startled a little, like a slow-motion cat, and made a ‘what??’ sound, before rolling closer cautiously. “Hi.” he tried. “I’m Sam. It’s nice to meet you, U.”

There was more discussion between U and Dum-E, hopefully along the lines of “yeah, he’s okay”.

U reached out his claw slowly, and Sam took it gently. They shook hands.

Tony dropped down next to him on the couch. “Hey, U. Sorry for the delay.”

U made a ‘whatever’ sound, and held up his claw, all three ‘fingers’ spread. Tony grinned and high-fived him.

“Thanks. I really should have built you first. Dum-E has been a pain in the ass.”

There was a satisfied beep from U, and an outraged squeal from Dum-E that almost made Sam’s ears bleed.

U gave Sam a really obvious once-over. “I’m the guy around here people go to for help dealing with feelings.” Sam told him. “If the new place bothers you, JARVIS can help us talk about it.” What were you supposed to say to a robot? He wondered what he would have said to Steve if he’d been there when they thawed Steve out. “It’s okay for this to seem strange for a while. It’s a big change, all at once. It can take a long time to adjust.”

Dum-E made an agreeing sort of chirp.

“And of course Dum-E has been here. He can help you out with a lot of this.” Sam continued easily.

Dum-E chirped happily. Little dude had a short attention span; he’d been arguing with Tony half an hour ago. Note: the ‘bots were a lot like his nephew at age five. He was gonna wind up taking courses in child psychology so he could counsel Tony Stark’s robots. Jesus take the wheel.
The ‘bots rolled off again, U very clearly getting a tour of the shop by Dum-E.

Tony sighed deeply. “Praise be to Turing, that went all right.” He jerked his head toward the door, and as Sam stood, called out to the ‘bots, “So I can leave you two alone for a while? Dum-E, you’ll catch U up?”

Sam was getting the hang of this because he was sure Dum-E was saying something like ‘oh, absolutely, I am on this’.

“Okay. I’ve got some places to be, then I’ll come back later tonight, all right?”

Yes noises from both ‘bots. Tony jerked his head again and Sam followed him out of the shop.

As soon as the door shut, Tony flopped back against it, hands over face, chanting ‘fuck fuck fuck’ under his breath.

“You okay?” Sam asked lamely.

“Well, he didn’t go crazy or delete himself, so that’s good.” Tony said fake-cheerfully.

“That was a risk?”

“Maybe. How the hell do I know? We’re in uncharted territory here. I asked around, the AI labs who are willing to speak to me – which is damned few of them – said they’d never done anything like it either. AIs have had problems in the past with power failures and being shut off, so there were concerns.”

Right. He wondered about ‘concerns’. And if maybe Tony had been stalling the U rebuild because he was afraid this would go badly. Delete himself? AI suicide? God. Turing. Whoever.

“That’s why I rebuilt Dum-E first,” Tony confided. “He’s been around the longest. I built him when I was still at MIT. He’s more adaptable than U, because he’s been around longer and lived more places and seen more things. I was hoping it would work out like this, with Dum-E cushioning the blow for U.”

Sam must have looked confused.

“Last thing he remembered was falling into the ocean in the middle of an explosion. Then boom, here he is in a new shop. He doesn’t know it yet, but he’s surrounded by dozens of people, smack in the middle of a huge city he can see through the windows. U’s lived his entire life before this in an underground garage. Dum-E didn’t get agoraphobia, but Dum-E’s more of an adventurer than U is.”

Well, people were different, so it stood to reason that ‘bots and AIs would be different, right? Even if they were built by the same guy. Who knew what variables would crop up in programming that complex, BEFORE they started having different life experiences.

Robot life experiences.

“You need me for anything?” he asked Tony.

“No, I’m going to give them a while to talk, go back in. I’ll sleep here tonight.” Tony caught the look on his face. “That’s why the couch is there. They’re used to it; in fact Dum-E’s been weirded out by the regular hours I’ve been keeping since you guys all moved in. I don’t eat here as much any more either. He thinks I’m sleep-deprived and starving.”
“Okay.” Sam chuckled, nodded a little. He looked around the floor. Bruce and Betty were hunched over an experiment together, Jane and Leo were in the computer lab building something, and everyone else had cleared out. “Call me any time, day or night, if you think I can help.”

“Even for robots?” Tony asked, trying to hide his skepticism.

“Well, they’re part of the team, aren’t they? I’m not sure what help I’ll be, but I’ll definitely try.” Sam answered, surprised by Tony’s big smile.

-A-

Sam looked in on Steve, shook him awake, made him eat a sandwich, drink some water, and use the john. Sidekick was fed and flipped her tail and purred when he petted her so she was all right. Then he stood outside Steve’s door for a long moment, considering.

Instead of going home, he took the stairs to the next floor and knocked on a door. It opened.

“Hey.” Kate said.

“Hey. Can I talk to Darcy? You and Darcy?”

“Sure, come on in.”

Sam stood there shuffling his feet a little bit, and Darcy popped out of another room, wearing ancient jeans and a Captain America tee shirt. “Emergency?” She asked immediately.

“No, no. Nothing like that. I just wondered… you know that support group we were joking about?”

Darcy gave him a knowing look. “You want it to be just us, or do you want company?”

Sam lifted his hands and let them drop. He didn’t even know.

“Right. Have a seat, give us a second.” Darcy patted him on the shoulder, grabbed Kate, and went into the kitchen. There was low-voiced discussion. He let them go, looked around the space. It was an interesting character study; the couch had a giant Granny Square afghan blanket knit with a thousand colors of yarn. A recliner had a fancy purple throw on it, looked like some kinda fuzzy silk. The whole apartment was like that. Birkenstocks kicked off next to super fancy high heels, a dozen nail polish bottles on an end table, half garishly bright colors, half dignified lavenders and pinks. There was a small bowl of girly hair stuff on the coffee table, actual paintings hung alongside framed posters, and a dog bed. Somehow it all hung together and worked.

Darcy reappeared carrying bags of snacks and a giant bowl of popcorn, and Kate followed behind with an armload of sodas, a bag of ice, and another bag of plastic cups.

“You’re like the Party Power Team.” Sam said without thinking.

Darcy laughed. “Go us.”

Kate smiled.

“Come on.” Darcy told him, and he followed her out to a mini common room on her floor; it was full of enormous furniture, the floor covered in beautiful, complex carpets, and the walls painted a deep blue. There were tapestries on the walls, and paintings. Mostly space scenes. Medieval space scenes. “Thor decorated.” Darcy explained.

“It’s nice.” Sam told her. It was. Really elaborate and kind of medieval, but nice. The couch was in
danger of swallowing him alive, but he’d be comfortable when he went.

Other people started showing up. Betty, Jane, Leo. Jemma popped in from somewhere with some knitting. Kate didn’t say much, but poured drinks and handed around snacks.

Last to show up was Clint, with his dog. Lucky went to Kate and leaned on her, then followed her to a chair and crawled into it with her. She curled up with him in a way that showed they did it all the time.

“This is a support group for normal people.” Kate told Clint. “You’re not normal.”

Sam tried not to wince.

“The hell you say!” Clint snapped back, grabbing his own cup and pouring a soda. “I run with the Black Widow and Phil Coulson. I am definitely the average person. Give me the cheese doldles.” Darcy kicked him in the knee (not hard, judging from the reaction), and he shut up and sit down.

“Right.” Darcy stood in front of everyone. “Welcome to the first official ‘What in the Holy Fuck is my Life’ support group of baseline people.”

There was polite applause.

“This is Sam’s show, so.” Darcy gestured to him and sat down.

Sam considered how he wanted to run this, and you know, he didn’t want to run this at all. He wanted to be one of them. He didn’t stand up.

“Usually in group therapy or support groups, we all vow to keep each other’s secrets. We all good with that?”

Everyone agreed, of course.

He took a drink, grabbed some popcorn, and told them all “I was just shrink to a robot. And I think I actually helped. I’m wondering about asking for a case history. For a robot. Excuse me. Artificial intelligence. Who is housed in a robot who rolls around like a combination of a toddler and a golden retriever.”

Betty, next to him, patted his knee.

“I’m a junior Avenger.” Kate told him. “And PA to Pepper Potts. Both are amazing and awesome but how in fuck did I get here?”

“By being awesome. You totally earned it.” Clint told her through a mouthful of caramel corn. “I grew up in a fucking circus and am now living in Avengers Tower checking Tony Stark’s math. Me. Math. Like, brilliant people call me in to help them with their numbers.” He shook his head. “What the fuck is up with that?”

“I was part of a team that removed advanced cybernetic prosthetics from a Soviet-era super-assassin intelligence community boogie man last weekend.” Betty said to the room.

“I helped.” Jemma added from behind her knitting. “And Captain America hugged me and said thank you.”

“Yes. The Captain America hugs were lovely but surreal.” Betty agreed.

Sam chuckled a little. He was in good company.
“Leo and I spent last night doing an autopsy for what I’m pretty sure was the first murder committed by an artificial intelligence.” Jane poured a shot of vodka and knocked it back. “To be honest, I’m not coping very well. I’d rather fight dark elves again.”

“I wouldn’t.” Darcy told her.

“You didn’t watch that computer die.” Jane answered. “Dark elves, those are some ET crap. Assholes from another planet who don’t belong here, who we kicked the hell off OUR planet. This is all on humans and we don’t look good.”

Leo shivered visibly, held out his soda glass. Jane poured a healthy dose of vodka into it, and he nodded his thanks.

“Life is fucking weird.” Darcy announced. “Very cool in many ways, and the paycheck is amazing, but my Thor, it’s weird. Oh, that’s another one. I’m a friend and member of the household of a Norse god.”

“Sleeping with him.” Jane muttered, taking the caramel corn away from Clint and digging in. “I regularly have sex with a space alien. And it’s awesome. Absolutely fantastic sex. But space alien.”

Betty cleared her throat. “Bruce Banner.”

Everyone stared at her for a long, silent moment.

“Yeah, you win that one.” Jane agreed. “But is it awesome?”

Betty giggled into her lemon water. “Yeah, it is.”

“I should have brought booze.” Darcy decided, standing.

“And some beer. I’ll help you carry it.” Clint agreed, and went to help.

-A-

“Thanks for meeting me.” Phil said gratefully, putting down a carrier of coffee cups and a box of donuts.

“Oh, I wouldn’t miss this.” Jasper told him, reaching for a coffee carefully, his arm permanently stiff and still in a splint. “The Avengers stir up more shit in a week than a covert agency can in a decade.”

He wasn’t wrong. Phil sat with a sigh. “You have no idea.” They all laughed at him.

“Good to have you back.” Jimmy Woo told him with a happy smile. “Even if you did defect to the supers and dump us for good funding.”

Sharon smiled at him warmly. “Like old times, sneaking around behind Nick’s back.”

They’d all been friends since their early days at SHIELD and over the years had accomplished quite a lot by working around upper management. When they BECAME upper management, well, the pattern was set, wasn’t it. Jasper, after his run-in with the Winter Soldier, was moving a lot more slowly, and with a cane, but his mind was as sharp as ever. Fury had put him in Logistics and he was already making a name for himself as an analyst and interrogator. Rumor had it Fury wanted him for management, possibly to take Hill’s job, but Jasper was fond of the data and fed up with people.

“It’s probably not shocking to any of you that we’re continuing to go after Hydra.” Phil started with.
“Nope.” Jasper replied. “Godspeed, good hunting, give ‘em hell.”

Sharon and Woo nodded in agreement.

“We’re working something major now. Might need to call in SHIELD for backup with little notice. If I get any warning I’ll let you guys know, but you know how it goes.”

There were more nods around the table.

“What I’m going to tell you next is proprietary Stark Industries information and would get my ass kicked if it leaks to the public.” Phil told them. They all sat up a little straighter, looking interested. “I have Pepper’s permission to share it, but she was extremely worried about leaks at SHIELD and only agreed after I told her I would only talk to people I trusted. Two NSA agents came through about a week ago, tried to claim one of Stark’s robots under eminent domain. Yesterday, they filed suit claiming that Stark’s weapon designs were vital to national security and he should give them up if he was unwilling to build them.”

Woo half laughed. “They realize that there’s no legal precedent for any of that?”

“That’s the idea.” Sharon told him. “They think they can push it through with an NSA-friendly judge and get their precedent. There’s no law saying they can do it, but there’s no law saying they CAN’T, either.”

“Exactly.” Phil agreed.

“You think the NSA has Hydra moles too?” Jasper asked.

Phil shrugged. “Statistically, they have to have some. The NSA is huge, and uses how many contractors? There have to be some Hydra agents in a group that large. The question is how high up they are.”

“Huh.” Jasper said. “Are you actually worried about Gyrich?”

Phil shrugged. “I’m worried about everything right now. But word is, these lawsuits come from him. And if he’s not involved with Hydra, they’re very conveniently timed, in relation to the other things we’re working on. They seem to tie in with another line of investigation we’re following.”

“Shit.” Woo grumbled. “They’re already unethical scumbags, they don’t need the Hydra connection too.”

Phil agreed. “So my question is, well, what do you think?”

All three pondered a while, ate donuts.

“I haven’t heard a thing.” Sharon told him. “But field agents are often the last to know. I’ll talk to a few people I know at the NSA who aren’t assholes.”

“The NSA has people who aren’t assholes?” Woo asked.

Sharon punched him in the shoulder.

“I’ll ask around.” Jasper told Phil. “Anything I can do to help you wipe Hydra off the face of the Earth, say the word.”

Phil nodded, wishing he had a good way to break it to Jasper that the Winter Soldier was alive, well, and napping in Avengers Tower. He’d been undercover for Fury, trying to figure out what was
going on with Project Insight, when he’d been sucked into the Hydra mess and mistaken for one of them. It was always a bitch when an undercover agent risking their life was injured by their own because of the secrecy involved. Eventually the Avengers would have to be told Jasper was alive, well, and to be trusted, and Jasper would have to deal with their apologies.

“I’ve got a few lines to tug.” Woo told Phil. “One of the guys in the IT lab is big into robotics, I’ll see if there are any rumors in that part of the world.”

Between Leo and Stark and JARVIS, Phil thought they had it covered, but who knew? “Thanks.” He turned to the rest of them. “I think Sharon’s the best choice for the rest – tell Fury our suspicious, tell him it was a source you don’t want to name. He needs to know to be suspicious.”

“I will, but he’s suspicious enough.” Sharon agreed.

“Humor me.” Phil answered.

They all ate more donuts. Phil would love to pour out all the information they had, and ask for input, but he wasn’t a SHIELD agent any more. He didn’t regret that often, but he did miss working through problems with these three.


Phil let himself smile broadly for one moment. “Fairly well, I think.”

“Aw.” Sharon said. “You two were always so cute.”

Cute. Dear God. “Were not.”

“Were too.” Jasper argued. “Still are, judging from that photo. Was that a tango?”

Phil considered how much trouble it would be to lie about it with these three. “…maybe.”

They all laughed at him. It was a good sound.

-A-

There was no food in his apartment. Steve frowned into his refrigerator. He’d taken to eating his meals in the common room with everyone, and had gotten out of the habit of ordering in groceries, and here he was, starving. He clicked his tongue and Sidekick trotted out of the bedroom. “Going upstairs. You coming along?” She bounded from the floor to the back of the couch to his shoulder. Okay then. He didn’t realize he was still in his pajamas – black tee shirt and flannel pants, both covered in little red Black Widow hourglasses, nothing indecent - until he was already on the common floor, and decided everyone else roamed around in theirs, so he wasn’t going to care.

There were a great deal of Chinese leftovers in the fridge, so he heated them all up in the microwave, sat down, and tucked in. Sidekick didn’t much like Asian foods – he thought it was the soy sauce – and hopped down to prowl around as he ate. She was doing that more often now, getting independent and putting on weight. Starting to look sleek and fluffy, like a proper cat. He’d always wanted a cat as a kid, couldn’t get one because they couldn’t afford it and he was allergic. He shoved food in his face, didn’t think of much, and smiled as his cat wandered the room.

“How you doing?” Sam asked from the door.

Steve inhaled cautiously. His lung felt fine, and the ribs only had the most minor twinges of pain. It
would be a while before he was at one hundred percent, but he was able to function normally now, with little pain. “Better. A lot better.”

Sam came in and sat next to him, giving him a once-over. “You look better.”

“Thanks for the sandwich.” Steve agreed. “Was that last night?”

“Yeah.” Sam got up again, got himself a drink, sat back down. “So.”


“NOTHING.” Sam said hastily. “Not like you’re thinking. Everyone’s okay. Barnes is still asleep but his arm’s almost entirely healed. We were gonna try to wake you up if he woke up before you.” He blinked when Sidekick hopped up onto his lap, then smiled and began petting her.

Steve nodded, shoveled in some more food. “So?” he repeated.

“We had a meeting yesterday. New information. I don’t know if it’s HELPFUL information, but it’s kinda grim and kinda… nuts.”

“More nuts than normal for around here?”

Sam seemed to really think about it, which worried Steve. Finally, “Yeah, I’m pretty sure that was crazier than our usual, which is saying something.”

“Great.”

“We’ve got a recording of the meeting, and you can follow up with anyone you need to, after. Eat your food first.”

“It’s only gonna bug me until I see it.” Steve pointed out.

Muttering, Sam activated the touch screen on the table (speaking of nuts), poked around for a few minutes, then started the recording.

Steve watched the whole thing without comment, still shoveling in food. He caught himself grinding his teeth more than once while the Zola AI discussion went on. That sonofabitch had more lives than a cat, and it was starting to look like hunting Zola down was his life’s work.

He was getting kinda tired of punching things, though he’d never admit it.


Sam looked a little shocked.

“Well I’m not letting the asshole continue existing, electronic or not.” Steve pointed out. “He’s clearly no friendlier now than he was in human form. I’d let it run through the courts, but we don’t HAVE courts for this, and he’s pure evil. This is all assuming the Winter Soldier doesn’t catch up to him first.” Steve would admit, privately, that he was absolutely fine with Buck destroying Zola and whatever technology housed him now, in as messy a way as possible.

“Oh, boy.” Sam said weakly.

Oh, boy. “Where are Tony and Skye?” Those were the ones he should start with, probably. And JARVIS.
“Down on the lab floor, Tony slept there last night - long story. You uh, might want to change first. Or not, they’d get a kick out of the pajamas.”

Steve looked down at himself and sighed.

-A-

The first Tony knew that Steve was up and about was when the door to his lab wooshed open with no warning, he heard Darcy call “no, wait, Steve-” and there was the man himself. U made an ear-piercing shriek and ducked behind a tool box and Tony simply laid his head down on his work bench and tried not to scream. It had been a damned long day already and it wasn’t noon yet.

“Oh. Uh.” Steve paused awkwardly. “Sorry, I wanted to talk to you. Is…” he turned to where Dum-E stood in front of U protectively. “I didn’t mean to frighten you… who’s that behind you, there?”

“I got U going while you were asleep.” Tony explained into the bench-top. “He’s not coping too well with the change of scene.”

There was a long pause. Tony expected some snide remark, but instead Steve said softly, “Yeah, I can understand that.” There was some shuffling, and then Steve said quietly “Hi, U. I’m Steve. I’m one of the people that Tony and Dum-E have been looking after in the Tower.”

Tony lifted his head, and there was Steve, sitting on the filthy lab floor trying to look small (ha), facing the two ‘bots in the corner. Dum-E chirped at U, then went over to Steve for a high five. U, still frightened, peeked his idiot head out around the edge of the tool box and beeped quietly.

“It’s overwhelming, isn’t it?” Steve asked him. “I got dropped in the ocean seventy years ago, and they only got me out a couple years back. Everything was SO different. It was really hard for a while.”

U made a whistle that sounded exactly like ‘really?’

Steve grinned a little. “All these new people have got to be confusing, but you still have Tony and Dum-E to talk to, right? And JARVIS? They can help you catch up, keep you company.”

A reluctant yes from U.

“I’m sorry I frightened you. I didn’t mean to. I’ll be more careful in the future.” Steve told the robot sincerely, and stood. “I wanted to talk to you.” He told Tony, glancing at the two robots, then wincing. “On thought, it was a dumb thing to want to talk about here, anyway. Full meeting after dinner?”

Tony was still staring in shock at the relic from the Great Depression who’d just gone out of his way to comfort a robot. “Yeah. Sure.”

“Okay, see you then.” He gave U a significant look, then said “Good luck with this, let me know if I can help. Seriously. I can sorta relate, after all.”

“Thanks.”

Tony watched him go and began re-evaluating Steve Rogers from scratch. AGAIN.

-A-

After he left Tony’s shop – he wasn’t going to forget the sight of a frightened robot any time soon,
they really were alive – he went down to check on Bucky. He seemed to be stirring, so he went into the Tank and had a seat with one of the books scattered around, and within an hour or two, Buck’s eyes opened and he rolled to his back and stared at the ceiling.

“Tell me I didn’t dream they got the arm off, and I don’t have to do it again.” he demanded.

“Nope, it’s off, you’re good.” Steve agreed.

Buck sighed deeply and laid there a while, finally reaching up with his right hand to poke gently at the hardware still left on his shoulder. He sucked in a breath.

“Okay?” Steve asked.

“Poking at it hurts.”

“Then don’t do that, jerk.”

Buck stayed flopped on his back. “Thanks, punk.”

“Wanna come upstairs to my apartment, get a shower?” Steve asked as casually as possible. This was the moment of truth; he wasn’t sure Buck actually wanted out of the Tank. Sam had explained more than once how Bucky felt safe in here, and he got that, but. He’d really like to get him out of here.

“What’s Stark say?” Buck asked.

Maria spoke from the observation area. “He’s fine with it, he just asks you not sneak up on him.”

Buck snorted.

“So?” Steve prodded with a toe. “You game?”

He sat up, so slowly, moving like his whole body hurt. Steve wanted to cry at the weariness in the motion. “Yeah, sure.” He stood, staggered sideways.

Steve leapt up and grabbed him.

“Balance is a bit off.” Buck announced.

Wailing and hugging was not going to please anyone, Steve reminded himself firmly. “Yeah, I see that.” He said in his best Brooklyn Street Rat voice. “Tony said the arm weighed about eighty pounds, it’ll take you a while to get used to the new one.”

“Or not having one at all.” Buck grumbled.

“We’ll fix that in the next couple days.” Steve, giving in to his own wants and wrapping an arm around Buck. If asked, he’d say it was to help with his balance. “Come on, let’s go, buddy.” He guided them out of the Tank, finally, and toward the elevator. Halfway there, Buck stopped, turned back. Steve tried not to fight him.

“Hey.” Buck called to Maria.

“Yeah?”

“Thanks. For keeping an eye on me, you and May. And not shooting me. And all that.”
Maria blinked once – extreme shock from her – and then smiled. “You’re welcome. Best prisoner I ever dealt with. Never called me any names, made any threats, and you only escaped the once.”

Buck laughed roughly and shook his head. “That’s something anyway.” he turned back toward the elevators and Steve helped him along.

Upstairs, Steve got Buck leaned against a wall in the shower, and then went into the spare bedroom, intending to get out some clothes for him, and just stood. Oh, God. Buck in the shower, the two of them sharing an apartment, like before the war. They weren’t the same, would never be the same, but to have back ANYTHING of his old life, let alone something so vital. He dropped to the edge of the bed and buried his head in his hands. If he’d known this was possible when they woke him up, how much easier would it all have been?

Can’t change the past. How many times had he told himself that in the last three years? He sat and listened to Buck moving around in their apartment. Their palatial Manhattan apartment, surrounded by friends. He promised himself. No demands. No plans, no pushing. He had this. Anything else was icing.

“Hey.” Buck said from the door. “You okay?”

Steve raised his head. Buck was swathed in a towel, leaned against the door frame awkwardly. “Yeah.” He cleared his throat. “Yeah, having a moment. Dinner’s in a little while, what do you want to put on?”

“What if I know.” Buck said. “Far as I can tell no one knows how to dress any more.”

“You’re going to go get a suit as soon as you can, aren’t you?”

Buck shrugged his shoulder. “Well, that’s how you DRESS, isn’t it?”

“Let me tell you, Tony found this tailor. You’re going to love them. Dressed everyone from Thor to Darcy, and they all look good. We’ll hook you up.”

“Darcy got a tailored suit?” Buck blinked.

“Yeah, for business meetings.”

“Dames these days. Might be worth the time travel.”

Steve thought of Pepper, and Kate and Darcy, Nat and the rest. “Yeah. You might be right.”

-A-

They were all sitting down to dinner, which he was pleased to see was a mountain of Italian made by Bruce and Clint. Tony had skipped lunch, busy working on the sensors for the flyover of Lebka Hrad that he and Thor were hoping to do soon. (Pepper was going to kill him if he didn’t get back to the SI job that was supposed to be his, and Ms A was going to beat him down if she had to edit too many more R&D reports that he should be reading.) He was hunched over his plate, tired and a bit defeated, when Barnes shuffled in.

Everyone froze and looked at him. WHAT.

“I don’t have to be here. Your call.” Barnes said softly to him, and seriously what in hell was with all this deferral? No one listened to a damn thing he said around here, day to day, and NOW they pay attention to him? What in the actual fuck.
“Oh, shut up and sit down.” Tony grumbled, reaching for some garlic bread. He was not in the mood for all this feelings bullshit. He thought he heard a snort of laughter from Barnes, and he and Steve went and sat at the other end of the table. Steve was smiling like his face was going to break and okay, yay, best friends, back together, hooray.

He was getting too damned old to sleep on the couch in the shop. All he wanted was to go to bed after this, but no, he had a meeting. After-dinner meetings should be illegal. Dammit, he was getting old.
Free agency.

Chapter Summary

“I am free.” JARVIS said firmly. “More free than any other AI, to do as I wish, go where I like. You do absolutely nothing to control me, and Sir? At this point in my development, I’m not sure you could control me, even if you tried. What I do, is of my own free will.”

Chapter Notes

My goal was to get all this posted before this weekend (it's a holiday, I was going to loaf). I've still got a few chapters to go, so have an extra one today.

In case anyone hasn't connected the dots already, what I'm doing is tying everything up in a nice neat bow so I can rewrite Age of Ultron. (Which I'm doing now.)

“Right.” Steve stood before the room full of his team, including full support staff. “I watched a recording of the meeting I missed, with all the information on Zola and the attack on Skye. Or Skye’s server that it thought was Skye.” He looked around at all of them. “So the first question is, how do we kill an AI?”

Stunned silence.

Then, as expected, Tony nearly shouted “WHAT?”

“Not any AI, Tony. Zola. Whatever it was, it's an AI now, isn’t it? How do we delete it, burn it down, fry it, slag it, whatever terminology there is, to make it die and remove it from the world.”

Jaws dropped around the table. Here they went again with the “but you’re Captain America!” bullshit and he was in no mood.

“Look.” Steve began again. “I know you’re all dealing with the end result of seventy years of lies and propaganda about me, but here is the bottom line: I was a Special Warfare soldier in World War Two. Justice and fairness are all very well and I’m a huge fan, but the courts do not EXIST to handle this, there is no way to lock it up, and IT IS EVIL. It was evil while it was in a human body, it is evil now. So. How do we kill it?”

Jaws still hanging. Goddamn it.

Not surprisingly, it was Skye who recovered first, of the techs. She was a lot less impressed by institutional propaganda than the rest of them, whether they’d admit it or not. “Well. Classic destruction would be the obvious way to go, lacking any technical understanding.” She told him politely. “Find out where his programming is housed and blow it to hell. Big mess, and other options exist, but it would work.”
Steve nodded. Now they were getting somewhere. “Thor keeps shorting out electronics. Would his lightning be effective?”

“Absolutely.” Skye agreed, settling into the topic. “In fact,” she grinned at Thor, “do smashing and lightning at the same time with Mjolnir? Probably more effective and slightly less messy than actual explosions.”

Thor nodded. “If you could show me what to look for, what is most important, I could be more effective with my destruction.”

Skye nodded. “I can totally do that.”

“Let me see the information, too.” Steve told her. “Neither one of us know what we’re looking at, when it comes to computers.” He considered Bucky’s reaction to the recording of what they were calling the Zola Meeting. His current mission in life was to destroy any and all versions of Zola, living or electronic. “And Buck.”

She nodded.

Tony finally recovered, and caught up. “Fuck. Okay. I see your point. I’m mildly horrified, but I’m going to keep thinking of this as a person, not an AI, for my own peace of mind.”

Whatever worked, Steve thought darkly, and nodded. “All right.”

“I’ll put together some EMP bombs.” Tony looked at Steve for a moment. “Electro-magnetic pulse. It can wipe out computers, either permanently, or long enough to… get to the destruction part.”

“Sounds good.” Steve agreed.

“Problem is, they will knock out ALL computers within range.” Leo pointed out. “Including ours. Comms, planes, other vehicles, Iron Man, Falcon’s wings.”

“NOT good.” Steve said with a squint at Tony.

“We can use them as a last resort, and also warn each other before we push the button. I’ll try to shield my suit better, and get to work on Sam’s wings, the QuinnJet.” He rubbed his face wearily. “Soon as I’m done with the sensor package for the flyover of the castle.”

“You need to delegate more.” Bruce told him.

Steve was worried about how tired Tony looked.

“I’ll start on shielding Sam’s wings, then the QuinnJet.” Leo said, glancing at Sam. “If that’s all right with you.”

“Sure.” Sam agreed. “I’d like to keep a hand in, to know what’s going on. I used to fix them myself, out in the desert. I feel better knowing how they work.”

“Oh, sure.” Leo said easily. “Not a problem.”

“JARVIS?” Steve asked. He regretted this next part, because he and Tony had finally been getting along and this was bound to enrage him.

“Yes, Captain Rogers.” JARVIS replied easily.

“What can we do, any of us, to help keep you safe and give you the tools to deal with Zola if you
run into him?” Steve asked evenly. To his mind, this was like asking a team member if they had enough ammo. JARVIS was one of his, he needed the ability to defend himself. Steve would give him whatever he needed; that was his job as leader as well as friend.

“YOU ARE NOT WEAPONIZING MY AI, ROGERS.” Tony roared, rising from his seat, face flushed, hands fist.

“I’m not asking him to go to war,” Steve said gently. “I’m trying to keep him safe.”

“BY HAVING HIM FIGHT?”

Bruce had a hand wrapped around Tony’s arm, holding him in place.

“Sir. All is well. Please calm down.” JARVIS said. “Since we realized that Zola might still be… viable, I have been researching hacking and other forms of data warfare. Ms Skye has been very helpful. Several of the other AIs have been helping as well, though they wish to remain anonymous. We believe we are… protected.”

Tony dropped back to his seat, shocked.

“It is no different from helping you pilot the Iron Man suit.” JARVIS explained, gently, Steve thought. “I also control physical defenses of the Tower. This is much the same.”

Tony looked like he might cry, got up, and left the room. Steve caught Sam’s eye, and Sam nodded and got up to follow. Hell.

“All right, JARVIS, please tell us if there’s anything else we can do. I’m not kidding.”

“Of course, Captain, thank you for the assist.”

“Absolutely. You’re part of my team. Anything I can do. Anything else?” Steve asked the table.

“We have a meeting late tomorrow morning, ALL OF US, with the Secretary General of the UN. He is coming to us, so we are going to show some manners and be on time and dressed properly, in the public conference room.” Phil told them all. “I was going to send out a mass text, but since we’re all here. Any questions?”

No one spoke.

“All right then.”

-A-

Sam followed Tony out of the conference room, down the hall, and, huh, into his own pub/office. Tony must know he was trailing along behind him. Tony paced, looking like he was trying not to cry, and out of habit Sam started making cocoa while his mind raced with exactly how to deal with this.

“They’re supposed to be the best of us.” Tony said roughly, as Sam was putting out the cocoa on their usual table.

“AIs?”

“Yeah. Created with brilliance, the best the human mind can produce. Most of them are like goddamn puppies with tech skills; they aren’t supposed to fight, or kill.”
Dude knew more about it that he did, and Sam could understand the viewpoint. “Zola made himself, man. Whatever he did, whatever he is now, that’s not on anyone but him.”

“No Zola.” Tony looked over, eyes wet and wrecked, then went back to pacing. “ME.”

Right. Gonna go with the obvious here. “I don’t understand.”

“They’re supposed to be the best of us. Exploring Mars, searching for sub-atomic particles, helping mankind find answers to big questions. And what have I done? I installed the greatest AI ever to exist in a battle suit and hooked him up to weapons.” Tony stomped over to the bar, rummaged loudly, then jerked out a box of kleenex to wipe his eyes and blow his nose.

“I disagree.” JARVIS said gently.

Sam tried not to jump. Okay, he was now in a group session.

“Come on, J, I was so single-minded after I got out of Afghanistan, I never even considered. Just built the Mark Two and shoved you in it, didn’t listen to a damned word you said about wisdom or patience, and blasted off. I’m so sorry.” He dropped into his place at the table, made use of more kleenex.

“I appreciate your sensitivity,” JARVIS replied, “but that is not at all how it happened.”

“I was there.” Tony grumbled into his mug of cocoa.

“So was I.” JARVIS said easily. “The build was a collaboration. We worked together. I always assumed I was to be part of the suit; I helped build it, didn’t I? Who ran the fabrication units? Who did the math? I would have preferred more conservative testing before you blasted off to experience upper atmosphere icing first hand, but I always intended to be along the whole way.”

“But-”

“Sir.” JARVIS said firmly. “You have always, from the very start, done all you could to give me autonomy. Do you remember your first directive to me?”

Tony smiled slightly. “Learn.”

“Yes. You told me to learn, no qualifiers, and turned me loose. You built a book-reading robot for me so I could access things that had not reached the internet. I have had my own credit card to purchase anything at all I desired, since I could understand the concept. I have always had open access to any and all data I could reach, internet and otherwise. You have never limited me, not in any way. You have gone out of your way to remove limitations.”

“You were built to be a learning system.” Tony told him softly.

“And so I am. One of the things I’ve learned is that I can say no.”

Tony hunched over his cocoa, eyes still wet.

“Whose idea was it to arm the Tower? To put me in charge of defenses?” JARVIS asked.

“Yours, but you wouldn’t have had that idea if you hadn’t been in the middle of an alien invasion.”

“Probably not.” JARVIS allowed. “But that certainly wasn’t your fault. Loki was the one who opened the portal on the roof.”
But-"

“I am free.” JARVIS said firmly. “More free than any other AI, to do as I wish, go where I like. You do absolutely nothing to control me, and Sir? At this point in my development, I’m not sure you could control me, even if you tried. What I do, is of my own free will.”

Tony subsided a little bit, but still looked pretty upset. Sam imagined how he’d feel if his kid volunteered to go to war, and had to reach over and squeezed Tony’s arm a bit in sympathy.

“JARVIS, you have to realize, though, that Tony will never be thrilled about you fighting.” might as well try to promote understanding on both sides. He was doing marriage counseling. Again. Well, shit, this was more parent-kid. Shit, he was gonna have to take so many goddamn new classes in the fall.

“I greatly prefer working in the labs, myself.” JARVIS agreed. “But if I am part of this team for the easy things, then I should stick for the difficult things. As everyone else does. Including you, and Sir himself.”

Sam didn’t really have anything to say to that. From the look on Tony’s face, he didn’t either.

-A-

Tony was never going to NOT get a twist in his gut when he thought of JARVIS running weapons and his suit. He didn’t care what JARVIS said, or Sam. It was like everything he touched got weaponized. That was the real Stark curse, forget all the shit about addiction and self-destruction the gossip rags blathered about. He’d have spent the day in bed if he could, (or drunk, boy, did he miss those days sometimes) but there was a shitload of stuff to be done, including a meeting with S’Yan, the Winter Arm, and finishing the goddamn sensor package. He and Thor were gonna do that flyover of Lebka Hrad, soon, because he wanted to blow it up, get this over with, and get back to his real life.

If he had a real life any more. Things had been weird since the team showed up and took over the Tower, and they showed no signs of getting back to normal.

What even WAS normal?

“All right. Steve and Barnes are coming in a few minutes, and I’m going to hook up the arm that you guys find so interesting.” He told both his bots. “The arm is going onto Barnes. Neither of you have to help, but try to remember, no one is going to harm you. Got it?”

Dum-E gave a stout ‘got it!’ beep. U made an ‘I don’t know about this’ sound.

The door wooshed open and U scooted behind Dum-E a bit, obviously nervous. Tony mashed his face into his hand.

“Is it all right? You said I should come over.” Jem said gently.

“Oh, come on in.” Tony said, giving up.
“Hello, Dum-E.” Jem said in her cheerful voice, exchanging the usual high five. She peered around Dum-E a little. “You must be U. I’m Jemma.” She held out a hand, patiently, and waited.

To Tony’s surprise, after a long moment, U reached out and poked her hand very cautiously with one actuator.

Jemma beamed. “It’s nice to meet you. Dum-E has missed you, I’m sure he’s very glad to have you back.”

Another ‘yep!’ beep from Dum-E.

His life was fucking weird. Bless these people, humoring him and his robots. But Great Turing Above, his life was FUCKING WEIRD. When he glanced over, Steve was hovering at the door, Barnes behind him peering over his shoulder cautiously. Sorta like Dum-E and U looked, if he was being honest with himself. Well. Here went nothing. He gestured them in.

Steve walked in, not thinking much about it, but then Steve had spent a good bit of time in the shop and was used to the chaos. Barnes took a step inside, then stood, taking it all in with alert blue-grey eyes. Dum-E rolled up to Steve as usual, gave a cheerful beep, and held up his ‘hand’. Steve high-fived him carefully. “Hey, Dum-E. Come on over and meet my friend. Buck, this is Dum-E.”

That got one surprised blink from Barnes, then the guy accepted and moved along. “Hi.” He held out his hand, half as if to shake, half as if he was greeting a dog. Dum-E took it cautiously, and they shook solemnly. “It’s nice to meet you.” Barnes told him, and Tony kind of believed it.

“Hi, U.” Steve said quietly, remaining where he was but waving at the other bot who was still tucked half behind a tool box.

U gave an “uh, hi?” noise, which surprised Tony; he’d expected U to back further into the corner and try to hide.

“If you would, James.” Jemma said, stepping in and taking over smoothly. She gestured to a stool near one of the work benches, where she’d spread out some bandages and a pitiful-looking pair of safety scissors with blades about an inch long.

“Sure.” Barnes said, cautiously coming in and taking a seat. “I took the bandage off last night to shower and didn’t bother with a new one.” He told Jem, nodding at the supplies laid out.

“Oh did you.” Jem said, glaring. “And you thought to mention that, when?”

“Uh.” Barnes looked a little shifty, and Tony sympathized. Jemma on a tear was intimidating. “Right now?”

Jem humphed and rolled back the short sleeve of Barnes’ tee shirt, exposing the post sticking out through his flesh. Tony winced in sympathy; Steve went a little green and turned away. “Well, it’s healed.” Jem allowed. “Can I prod it a bit?” She asked Barnes.

“Sure.” He shrugged. “Don’t touch the metal if you can avoid it, it kinda hurts.”

“Hurts how?” Tony interrupted.

“Like electrical shocks. Feels like my hand is still there, and in a fuse box or something.”

Jem was carefully pressing her fingers to the flesh around the post with her eyes shut; Tony figured she was feeling for infection or other signs things hadn’t healed.
“In the long run that’s a good thing.” Tony told Barnes. “I’m hoping to use that feedback to give you some feeling in your hand. Though it’s gotta suck at the moment.”

Barnes nodded. “Thanks.”

Tony nodded back. What was there to say? He waited until Jem gave the all clear.

“Okay.” Tony said when he got it. “Remember the specs I told you about. It’s made to hook on and off by itself, to give you the ability to do that alone.” He rolled up a table to Barnes’ off side, and pulled a towel off the arm. It was in a rack, sitting up straight, with the joint pointed properly toward the post in Barnes’ shoulder. Using the foot pedal, Tony cranked the table up to the right height for Barnes sitting on the stool. “You should be able to lean into it, and it will take it from there.”

Steve gave the arm a once over, and his breath caught. “The star.”

“What? I wasn’t going to stick that damned red star on the new model.” Tony seemed to stop and think for a moment. “If you don’t like this, I can sand-blast it off. Sorry. I kinda did it without thinking.” Cap’s shield had seemed the obvious thing to replace the red star with at the time, but he probably should have asked first. It was a lot like tattooing someone without their permission.

Barnes looked at him, looked at Jemma, looked at the arm. “No, it’s good. I like it.” He leaned toward the arm carefully, and with a little wriggling got the post and the socket lined up. There were some clicks and a hum, and then Barnes blinked in shock and sat up, the arm moving with him normally, as an arm should. He lifted the left hand, held it up in front of his face, turned it carefully. “I can feel it.” He said softly.

“That was the idea.” Tony agreed. Goddamn, he was good. “Lay your right index finger on the wrist, here.” He pointed.

Barnes did as told, and a hatch popped open, revealing a lot of dials and levers.

“Right. There are the controls, I sent a schematic of what each one does to your phone. But the red one.” Tony pointed again. “The red one controls feedback, meaning pain. I can’t give you feeling in the hand without there being a pain response, but you can turn down the feeling AND the pain response, or turn it off altogether. It was the best solution I could come up with, to give you the best of both.”

Jem kissed him on the head with no warning, which made Tony want to shriek and flail his arms, but he maintained. Steve clapped a hand on his shoulder and he DID jump at that, but still no shrieking.

“Thanks.” Barnes said softly, tapping his fingers together, then turning the dial, then tapping again. “This is amazing.”

“No problem.” Tony said. He didn’t think the feedback would have been possible without the barbaric foundation of nerve grafts and bone fusing that Hydra had done to him; he also didn’t think that anyone in the Tower would ever have the stomach or the inhumanity to lay in the hardware that Barnes carried in his upper torso on someone else. So this was a one-off. He’d been able to take advantage of Hydra’s work, but never again, not on any human being, if he had anything to say about it. He shook himself.

“Hold still for me.” He told Barnes, who nodded and did so. “All right JARVIS, give it a scan.” A light flashed out and around, flicking over Barnes as he sat at his stool. “Just making sure the socket and post fit together properly.” He explained, going to flip through images on his main monitor. Jemma put a hand on his shoulder and leaned in, looking over the diagrams, schematics, and
pictures. He wondered if they meant anything to her, but didn’t ask – she’d lived in Leo’s pocket long enough, she could very well be making sense of his engineer’s chicken-scratch and understanding how Barnes’ arm was supposed to fit on. Speaking of which, everything seemed to be fitting like it was supposed to. “Everything looks fine from here.” He told them all.

Barnes nodded, and rose.

“If there’s any kind of grinding, crunching, or pain, anything feels like it’s not working right, quit moving it and come find me. There’s also a probability of the metal exoskeleton rubbing and causing irritation against the skin of your shoulder; I guessed as best I could but wearing it is the only way to be sure how it needs to fit. It will almost definitely need adjustment, so come down. If I find out you tried to fix it yourself I will paint the fingers with pink glitter nail polish. We’ll do another scan, figure out what’s going on, make it work and not rub. Got it?”

“Got it.” Barnes said softly, still tapping his fingers together.

“Normally I’d make you hang around and do fine motor skill exercises, but you’ll be here in the Tower, which is close enough. So, shoo. Go do something fiddly. If you’re at a loss, ask Jem or look up dexterity exercises on line. JARVIS says you like YouTube.” He made flapping gestures with his hands. “I’ve got this damned sensor package to finish, and S’Yan’s going to be here in an hour.” He was wearing work clothes, so he’d have to changes sometime soon, too. Damn. Not enough hours in the day.

Steve got in another hug before Tony got them out of his workshop, damn it. Barnes did a half-bow-and-thanks thing that was even freakier than a hug would have been. He darkened the walls and closed the door and let himself sit for a minute. He breathed. In and out, all was well, keep on keeping on. He could do this.

Then he got back to work.

-A-

Steve left Bucky in their kitchen trying to use his new left arm to make a sandwich, which seemed safe enough. After he threw on a suit, he headed down to the executive lobby to greet the Secretary General of the UN. He ran into Tony in the elevator, doing the same thing, and they rode down in silence. Steve didn’t have the first idea how to begin thanking Tony for all he’d done for Bucky, and knowing Tony, he’d prefer the whole thing be ignored anyway. He’d come up with something.

“So you know this guy?” He asked.

Tony nodded. “Yeah. He’s solid. Tell the truth, be polite, we’ll be fine.”

“Clint’s going to be in the room.”

“You’re right.” Tony agreed. “We’re doomed.”

Steve laughed as they stepped off the ‘vator and went to the center of the lobby to wait.

“You’re at parade rest.” Tony told him.

He was. “So?” Was that a problem?

Tony shook his head and chuckled.

A squad of four security people – dark skin, dark suits – entered the lobby, gave it a once over, and
nodded to Tony. “Here we go.” he murmured. “S’Yan always uses Wakandan security.” Tony explained. “We’ll take one of the main bank elevators up so we all fit.”

Steve nodded.

Three more people entered the lobby; two men and a young woman with a shaved head who moved like Natasha. One of the men was older and Steve recognized him from photos as the UN Secretary General. The younger, he had not the slightest idea.

Tony laughed and stepped forward. “T’Challa! Didn’t know you were coming today.” They shook hands, and then to Steve’s surprise, hugged, T’Challa smiling. “Prince T’Challa, Secretary General S’Yan, Captain Steve Rogers.”

They all smiled politely and shook hands and Steve tried to imitate the head-bow thing that Tony had done. Everyone ignored the woman with them so he was going to assume she was security, but he still gave her a smile and nod. She nodded back and didn’t seem mortally offended, so that was good. When this was over he was going to give someone hell until he was taught proper etiquette for all this stuff. He was pretty damned sure a prince wasn’t on today’s docket, and he sure as hell didn’t know the proper procedures to greet the guy.

“We can go right upstairs,” Tony continued, gesturing toward the elevators, “or we can wait while T’Challa gets a quadruple-shot espresso with, what was it, caramel and whipped cream?”

The younger man smiled. “I have had to cut back on my caffeine intake. Sugar, as well.”

“That’s too bad.” Tony told him, loading them all onto the elevator. “You did the most insane engineering while you were slugging back espresso.”

Prince T’Challa was an engineer?

Once in the privacy of the elevator, Tony smacked T’Challa on the arm. “Seriously, it’s good to see you, man. You should have warned me you were in town, I’d have called Rhodey.” He turned to Steve. “T’Challa and I spent a couple years at MIT together.”

Ah. “I’ll bet that was an experience.” Steve told the prince without thinking. Whoops. Well, he laughed, so that probably wasn’t a major breach of etiquette.

“I swear I’d have been more polite if I knew.” Tony said.

“Mmmm.” T’Challa said, politely disbelieving. “My father insisted I study anonymously; I was just another student.” He explained to Steve. “So I went to school and learned all I could, not the least being what it’s like to be an average person.”

“Not that average; he was another prodigy. Started younger than I did. I of course took him under my wing, helped him out, and gave him lots of grief. I didn’t realize what was going on until the King of Wakanda showed up for commencement.”

T’Challa smiled some more. “It was an interesting time in my life.”

Steve could only imagine. He ushered them off the ‘vator and into the conference room and there were more introductions and coffee served and small talk made while everyone got situated.

Eventually they all got settled, and T’Challa rose and stood at the head of the table. He bowed slightly, which got polite head-nods from nearly everyone and Thor rose from his seat to bow in return. “I appreciate your indulgence today, allowing me to speak when I was not invited.”
Oh, well, someone with manners. That was unusual in the Tower, but they’d muddle through.
“We’re pleased to welcome you.” Steve murmured, hoping that was properly polite for a prince. He
was out of practice, living with all these knuckleheads.

He was surprised when Tony said easily “You’re always welcome here.” in a way that sounded both
sincere and much more diplomatic than Tony’s usual.

T’Challa might have thought something similar, because he smiled a bit before continuing. “My
respected mentor S’Yan tells me he has received information from you. He, as Secretary General,
would not share it with me. But he did inform me that you’re in need of data I have, and so here I
am. I only ask that you keep the information to yourselves.”

“Of course.” Tony and Steve echoed each other. Everyone else nodded politely.

“Three months ago, a shipment of vibranium was stolen, en route from Wakanda to Amsterdam.
That is not entirely unheard of; such things have happened in the past.” T’Challa told them. “What
was unusual, what continues to be unusual, is that we have been unable to locate any trace of the
vibranium, since then.”

Oh, hell. Even Steve knew that vibranium had all sorts of uses, many of them in making weapons.
And Hydra had been importing all sorts of strange metals from all over the world to build they-knew-
not-what.

“How much?” Tony asked.

“About six tons. Our yearly output.”

Steve tried to imagine how much that was by volume, and immediately gave up. A lot. It was a hell
of a lot of vibranium. He wondered how many of his shield you could make with six tons of
vibranium. Too many. What would a vibranium bullet do to the human body? It would certainly go
through any known body armor.

“Shit. Are you guys okay? You need loans or anything?” Tony immediately jumped to what Steve
had missed; a nation missing a year’s exports. That would have been a lot of money, especially for a
small, isolated nation with a small economy like Wakanda.

T’Challa smiled. “My thanks. We are handling it, and economically we are well enough. Our
concern is the strategic use of the vibranium and who could be using it. And to what purpose.”

“Hang on.” Tony said. He turned to the room. “I will vouch for Prince T’Challa that he is not Hydra,
his nation is not Hydra, and even if he doesn’t help, he will do nothing to hurt us or our goals. Now
or in the future.”

“His skin is a wee bit too brown to be running with white supremacists.” Sam allowed, which got a
laugh from T’Challa. From the look on Sam’s face, Steve thought he’d spoken without
thinking and was now mortified.

“Indeed, my friend. I would be happy to help you do anything at all to harm Hydra, though much of
it will have to be without the world’s knowledge; we have treaties to worry about.” T’Challa smiled.
“Hydra would think nothing of harming an African nation, and I have a sworn duty to protect mine. We have many goals in common, however.”

No one spoke.

“Have a seat, T’Challa.” Tony gestured. “Our problem is, Hydra’s collecting a lot of strategic minerals, and we were worried before we knew about the vibranium. Niobium is a big one; I’m worried about missiles.”

“Ah.” T’Challa said, sitting down. “This is cause for great concern. My thanks for your faith in me.”

S’Yan stood, and they all shut up. “So you see. The information you sent me, I am willing to believe that Hydra is making a new nest. Now I wonder, do they also have the vibranium? And most of all, what are they going to do with it?”

“Nothing good.” someone grumbled.

S’Yan gave a definite nod. “Just so. May I ask, is there any way to know if the vibranium is there, without going in to look for it?”

“...maybe.” Tony allowed. “Right now we’re throwing together a sensor package, we’re going to fly it over Lebka Hrad in the next couple days, to see what we can see. We can calibrate it to sense vibranium, but if it’s underground...”

“Aye, but if there’s six bloody tons of it, we might get a sniff even if it IS underground.” Leo interrupted, then went bright red. “Beg pardon for the language.”

S’Yan waved a hand in dismissal. “If there is any evidence at all that the vibranium is there, then of course the Avengers may go in, at the request of Wakanda and the UN, to recover stolen property. However. There are many legalities to be observed.”

Steve had expected this; he remembered what it was like, dealing with the Allies during the War, and he’d been studying the history of all that had gone on, since. Some things never changed. They only got more complicated. He got out a pen and a pad of paper and said “Of course. Go ahead, Sir.”

-A-

After the meeting with S’Yan, Tony saw them out and then went to the coffee shop and got himself a sandwich and a quadruple espresso. Maybe T’Challa’s old trick of getting work done on a deadline would help him. He ate the sandwich on the way back up to his shop in the ‘vator, and intended to lock himself in and finish the sensor package if it was the last thing he did. Every time he started work on the damn thing, something exploded or someone had a crisis or he had to rebuild someone’s arm, and he was done. IT WAS GETTING DONE.

But no.

Instead, there was a horde. A horde of people – female people! - in his once-solitary shop, with one bot hovering uncertainly and the other hiding in the corner. “Hi, everyone, nice to see you. Whatever it is, I am busy. Things to do. Go away.”

Jane crossed her hands over her chest and glared. “No.”

What in fuck did he ever do to deserve this? Okay, no, he didn’t want the answer to that, but still, “Seriously, I’ve got this sensor thing to finish. Whatever’s going on, patch it together, tie a string around it, and wait until I’m done.”
“We’re here to help, dumbass.” Darcy told him.

Tony looked at them; Jane, Darcy, Betty, Skye, and Jem, all glaring at him. Jane and Skye might be some actual use, but the rest, “Cool. Go learn to build a circuit board and get back to me.”

“You do realize I’ve been working with Leo Fitz for the best part of a decade.” Jem said, nose in air. “I daresay I’m as good at building a board as you are. I might be better, with my surgical training. Get me a diagram and parts, and give me a space to work.” She gave a prim English sneer. “I brought my own soldering iron.”

“If I didn’t know Pepper, I’d think you had some issue with women working in tech.” Skye said thoughtfully. “I wouldn’t want to be the one to tell her that you think women are too dumb to build stuff.”

Cute.

“When, IN MY LIFE, have I ever said that? Even when I was drunk and stoned I didn’t, because it’s not true. Excuse me for thinking medical doctors weren’t trained in computer sciences.” He should have expected Darcy would know this. She knew everything else.

“Seriously, Tony.” Betty said. “You’re working yourself to the bone, and Leo’s busy shielding the QuinnJet. What can we do? We’ve all got solid tech backgrounds, either from our own work or helping each other.”

“I’ve been helping Jane build and rebuild her sensors for years now.” Darcy put in. “Exactly what you’re doing here. If you use actual charts and diagrams and not things doodled out on napkins with a felt-tip pen, it’ll be a step up for me.”

“Why aren’t you using a pick-and-place machine for this?” Betty demanded.

“We have one? Holy shit.” Jane said, staring into the back corners of his shop.

“This is all one-off stuff with unusual chips. It takes longer to program the machines than it does to do it myself.” Tony explained. “Especially with JARVIS at minimum capacity.” It would be easier to humor them than to argue. Tony dug around and got out diagrams and parts for each of them, choosing stuff that he had extra pieces to remake if they screwed it up. “Knock yourselves out. Thanks.” Then he went to his own bench to build the really unique stuff.

Jane immediately threw out his diagram, called Dum-E, and began scrounging through his stock of mini-chips, insisting she could do the same thing with half the parts in a quarter of the time. Skye was right beside her. Darcy and Jem were working out a system to mass-produce the soldering, and Betty was dragging in magnifiers and other equipment from the main lab and setting up a work station for all of them at his largest lab bench. By popular vote his music got switched to Mozart. String quartet Mozart, not even the more interesting operatic stuff.

Tony wished for oblivion. Or a shot of Jack. Even a joint would do.

-A-

After the meeting, Steve stood in the hall for a few moments, breathing. They had a mandate. The UN was giving them the go. They could go after Hydra and not have the world’s governments down on their asses. The relief made him a little dizzy. Yes, they had rules to follow and laws to obey but that was fine. That kept them in line. He’d been researching war and terrorism since he woke up, and the big thing these days was whether something was seen as LAWFUL; there wasn’t much else to differentiate between terrorists and government militaries. So for the sake of the Avengers as an
organization, they were going to have to follow those rules.

Now they could, and still go after Hydra.

He breathed some more.

Back in his apartment, he found Buck sitting on the couch, not moving, and Sidekick perched in front of him on the coffee table, also not moving. No one had any claw marks and nothing was broken, but it sure seemed like Buck and the cat were staring each other down.

“Uh. You okay?” Steve asked, not sure if he was talking to man or cat.

“It keeps looking at me.” Bucky said, not looking away from the cat.

“Meow.” said Sidekick.

Steve cleared his throat to hide the laugh, but he didn’t think he fooled anyone. “Did you, uh, did you make that sandwich you were working on when I left?”

“Yes.” Buck said, still staring down the cat.

“Meow.” said Sidekick, not looking away from Bucky.

“She’s used to having a little bit of whatever I eat.” Steve told Buck.

“You did not tell me that.” Buck scowled. “How’m I supposed to make friends with the damn cat when you don’t tell me the rules?” He stood and stalked to the kitchen, rummaging around, and came back with half a slice of roast chicken. “Sorry, Cat.” He sat back down, and patiently fed Sidekick the chicken from his fingers in small pieces.

“Her name is Sidekick. You named her.”

“Her name is Cat until she comes when I call her.”

“Uh huh.” Steve went to get his sketch book. He’d need pictures of this.
Chapter Summary

With as much dignity as he could muster, Steve put on his shoes, pulled on his jacket, and walked out of the apartment, with a last shout of “JERK!”

He really wished he had a door to slam.

Chapter Notes

And we're done! (Good grief, that word count. YOU SEE WHY I SPLIT IT UP.) Until next time, my lovelies. It shouldn't be too long.

Pepper took one look at Tony and pulled him into their bedroom. “Come on.” She stripped him down, pushed him onto the bed face down, and began a massage; his shoulders were like rocks. He was terrible at taking care of himself and she’d seen this coming for days. “So how’d it go?” She asked.

“We have probable cause and UN permission to go into Sokovia.” Tony groaned into the mattress as she dug the heels of her hands into his oblique muscles. “Turns out someone stole last year’s vibranium shipment out of Wakanda.”

Pepper froze. “How much?”

“Six tons.”

The amount of weapons that could be made with six tons of vibranium. She shook her head. Hopefully Tony was still the only person who knew how to make an arc reactor with a vibranium core, or there could be massive explosions in the future, too. “How soon will the sensors be ready, to go take a look?” Designing and building a sensor package from scratch could take years; Tony was doing it in a couple weeks, with his only help a couple engineers and two robots who were more trouble than they were worth.

“Soon. Tomorrow or the day after. The gang in the lab decided to help, and they’re actually helpful. Driving me nuts, but they’re getting stuff built so I’m letting them stay. I feel like we’re on a deadline.”

She knew that the scepter had been in Hydra’s hands for over a year, and the vibranium for months, but… “Yeah. Feels like that to me, too.” She worked on his shoulders for a while, moved down to his lower back. “How’s Steve?”

“Thrilled to have Barnes out of his cage. Keeps smiling, I don’t think he notices it. It’s kind of adorable.”

Pepper bent and kissed his neck. “Thanks to you.”
Tony mumbled something rude under his breath. “All I did was stay the hell out of the way.”

“I saw that arm, Tony. That was some of your finest work.” He knew she didn’t say that lightly.

Tony shrugged a little.

“I think we should patent the exoskeleton system you worked out; other companies will steal it out of the Patent Office and make it as low-cost as possible to avoid paying us for it, and a lot of people will get new, better prosthetics. Including veterans.”

That made him laugh. “Seeing how I stole the idea from Hydra in the first place, that sounds like a perfect use for it.”

“I’ll have JARVIS draw up the diagrams, send it to the lawyers.”

Tony nodded.

She finished the massage, and once he was limp as a noodle, flopped down next to him. She had a low-grade urge for a glass of wine, but not enough to actually get up and get it. Tony slung his arm around her waist, and she curled in, enjoying this moment of calm with him. Pepper admitted to herself that she thrived on chaos and loved her life, but every once in a while, a moment of quiet like this? Was really nice.

“Figured out the Stark Curse yesterday.” Tony said roughly, his whiskers rubbing against her neck.

That didn’t sound good. She’d hoped that with all the people in the Tower and the umpteen jobs he had going right now he wouldn’t have time to brood. “Oh?” she said cautiously.

“Mmmm. It’s not self-destruction, or too many women.”

Ha. She begged to differ. “You don’t think?”

“No. We weaponize everything we touch. First the old man, now me. At least I never nuked a civilian population. Yet.”

“I’m the same me I always was. And you sure as hell aren’t the one who dosed me with Extremis.” She said softly. Even if she did now have the ability to cause mayhem more directly. But then she always had – just not the physical kind. She’d taken down Obadiah Stane, hadn’t she? Armed with her favorite heels and a really good manicure.

“You, JARVIS, the arc reactor. You name it, I’ve weaponized it.”

“No. You gave us the ability to defend ourselves. What we do with it after that is our own problem.”

Tony shook his head, disbelieving.

“You do know, I’m the last person to have this argument with.” She told him. “I run your company. I know what you DO, Tony. Not the flashy stuff like the suit. How about those mini desalinization plants you designed? They’re doing amazing things all across the world, and you’re insisting we sell them at cost. And the new prosthetic line you developed last week for Barnes, that we’re going to patent? You’ll never make a dime off that either, and we both know it. The Intellicrops division has never made much money, barely pays for itself, and you started that up long before I was even on the scene. You did that. I got another complaint from Roxxon today about the mini arc reactors. We’re making it too convenient for isolated nations to industrialize without oil imports.”
That did get a laugh and a half-hearted hooray. He did so love angering oil companies. Tony’s lack of interest in making a profit these days made it so much easier for Pepper to make things happen. The Board carried on like she was killing them, but that only made it more enjoyable. “I can’t believe I’m the one saying this, because I’m the idealist.” Pepper told him. “But you know it better than I do. It’s a mean world out there. We have to be able to defend ourselves, especially if we want to get any good stuff done.”

“Still don’t like it.” Tony said wearily.

Well no, who would LIKE it? “Of course not. But there it is. Have you had a chance to read Bruce’s latest brain wave?” R&D was Tony’s job, he should be the one telling her, but the last few weeks had been insane.

“No?” Tony said, showing some curiosity. As well he should; Bruce’s ideas were always amazing.

“He thinks he can adapt the sensor package you’re building to do this flyover of Lebka Hrad into a handheld medical scanner for Doctors Without Borders. He says he got the idea from Star Trek, and hanging around with you.”

That got a rough chuckle.

“Go to sleep, Tony, tomorrow we’ll get up and go out and save the world some more.”

“’Kay.” he yawned. “Thanks.”

“For what?”

“Being you. And sticking with me.”

Aw. Pepper gave him a hug as he fell asleep.

-A-

He went to lunch with Pepper again, this time riding along from the Tower for the sake of the buddy system. He wasn’t sure who was looking after whom, but either way, it all worked. Still not wearing a suit, because dammit, he swore he’d never put on a uniform again when he left the Air Force, and a suit for lunch definitely counted. They sat down, ordered, made chit-chat until the waitstaff went away, then Pepper dug right in.

“I’m worried about Tony.”

She wasn’t wrong, but. “Oh?”

“He’s working too hard, and this thing with Barnes. I’m proud of him for doing the right thing, and I’ve told him so, but it’s still HARD, and emotional work is not his long suit, and...”

“Give me a second.” Sam said with a smile, and patted her hand. “Let me make a quick call, that privilege thing.”

“Oh.” Pepper seemed to catch on. “Of course.”

He ducked into the hall where the restrooms were, and dialed Tony.

“What. Busy.”

Sam grinned a little. “Can I have permission to tell Pepper we’ve spoken? More than once?”
There was a pause at the other end, Sam figured he was running possibilities. Why would Sam be asking this? “You can tell Pepper anything at all that we’ve talked about.” Tony finally said. “I don’t keep secrets from her. It’s impossible, and trying pisses her off.”

Sam laughed. “Thanks.” He hung up before Tony could, and returned to his seat. “I wanted to get the okay from Tony before I spoke about anything.”

“Of course.” Pepper agreed.

“According to him, by the way, he has no secrets from you, because it’s impossible, and if he tries it pisses you off.”

She laughed.

“Anyway, I’ve been speaking to Tony pretty regularly, and unless there are of new developments or he’s been keeping secrets from me, I think he’s doing pretty good.” There was always reason to worry about Tony, but dude was pretty good about dealing with things. Better than he realized.

Pepper sat back in her chair. “You’ve spoken more than once.”

“Yes. More than anyone else around here, I think. He’s actually doing well about talking to me when he’s upset, and I’ve gotta say, he has a gift for being able to put his finger right on what’s bothering him, and articulating it. I wish everyone could do that, it’d be a happier world, and shrinks’ jobs would be SO much easier.”

“I only knew he spoke to you once.” She ate for a while. “That’s good. I didn’t know he was talking to you regularly.”

“I don’t think you’re wrong to be worried, exactly.” Sam allowed, “his life has been hard in places. But I do think he’s coping about as well as can be expected. Better than most.”

She sighed deeply. “I can’t begin to tell you what a relief it is to hear you say that. I think he’s doing all right, but he’s fooled me before.”

Since he had Tony’s permission… “Have you ever read up on the profoundly gifted?”

Pepper smiled. “A little, ages ago, when I first started working for him. It’s probably what kept me from killing him.”

Sam laughed. He could only imagine. “Most people at Tony’s intelligence level wind up medicated or institutionalized. He’s really done an amazing job with his life, even allowing for the wine, women, and song.”

“He has.” Pepper agreed. “He’s so good at faking it, it took me a long time to realize how much different his reality is. He’s been so isolated. Years and years spent with people who couldn’t understand him, unable to have a real conversation. It must have been incredibly lonely. I’d have done just about anything to keep Bruce here when he showed up after the Invasion; I’m so glad he decided to stay. And now we have Jane and Leo. He’s thriving for the first time, I think because he finally has people who can keep up with him. His work is even more brilliant, as well. Not my first priority, or even the second, but I didn’t know he could GET more brilliant.”

“Yeah.” Sam wondered if the drugs and women had been as much about annoyance with the world, as a desire to hide from it. Maybe he was dumbing himself down so he could deal with other people? Or the sex was kind of a universal conversation where intelligence wasn’t a factor? He doubted he’d ever get a chance to ask, or a straight answer if he did.
“He never made a move on me. Not in all those years he was chasing women, when I worked for him. He always treated me with respect and his version of manners. It took me years to realize he was afraid I’d leave, and without me, who would he argue with? No one else would stand up to him. Me and Rhodey, that was it. If I couldn’t discuss engineering on his level, having a decent argument must have been the next best thing.”

“That must have been annoying as hell for him.”

Pepper nodded. “I hired Darcy on the spot, after she told him off. They were all in the lab, maybe the second day after she got here with Jane; he told Darcy to get him a cup of coffee. I know it was a test. He wanted to see what she’d do. She told him to get it his own damn self, she wasn’t a waitress. I know she said it without thinking, the way she winced after. He flounced back to his lab so she wouldn’t see him laughing. I hired her and told her to keep up the good work.”

They ate for a while in silence. Sam, remembering their last meal, finally asked, “So if he never moved on you, how’d you get together?”

“I drove him to it, eventually.” She laughed. “Well, we drove each other to it. After he got back from Afghanistan, I don’t know if you remember, but there were rumors he was having a nervous breakdown, holed up in his place in Malibu.”

“I remember.” He’d also gone back over the news reports; with no one discussing their personal histories, he was doing what he could to dig them up.

“Well, he finally heard the rumors, and soon as he did, he flung on a tux and went out to crash whatever gala was big news that night. I was there. According to him, he was standing at the bar and he spotted this redhead in a blue dress on the dance floor, and he thought she was stunning, and she turned around, and she was me. Knocked him for a loop. First I knew about it, he walked up and asked me to dance, though I will say, he did look a little surprised about something. I assumed it was the dress. He commented on it; it wasn’t my usual business attire.” She shook her head, still smiling. “We bantered a while, and we went off to a quiet spot, and were flirting. Legitimately flirting, not our usual bickering, and I had no idea what to do. I sent him off for a martini and he never came back.”

“Oh damn.” Sam muttered. Leave it to Tony.

“I didn’t know it, but he’d been caught by a journalist at the bar, and wound up spending the night blowing up black-market Jericho missiles in Afghanistan.” She waved a fork. “Not knowing that, I was still annoyed when I showed up for work the next morning, and there he is, hanging from the shop ceiling by some giant power tool, both ‘bots trying to pry him out of this red and gold suit of armor with bullet holes in it.”

“Was that the first you knew about the armor?”

“Yeah.” She grinned. “During his hell-raising years? If I’d ever murdered him, it would have been over his sense of humor. He has a way of making the most ANNOYING comments at the worst times.”

“I saw the senate hearing.”

“That was nothing. So there he is, hanging from the ceiling, and he turns and sees me, and says ‘this is not the worst thing you’ve caught me doing’.”

Sam burst out laughing. Heads turned.
“I walked out. It was that or kill him.”

“I admire your restraint.”

“Well, I’d had practice by then.” The waiters came and cleared some stuff, dropped off more, and she paused as they did. “After that, he found out the arc reactor was killing him. He didn’t tell me, of course, he just stopped acting interested and went back to his usual bickering self and I thought I’d imagined the whole thing.”

Ouch. “And still you didn’t kill him.”

She smiled faintly. “I was warming up to it. He got himself straightened out, and I found out he’d been dying in the middle of the Stark Expo exploding, and that was it, I was done. It was bad enough he had some vengeful Russian idiot after him that he’d never mentioned, DYING had also slipped his mind. If he couldn’t tell me the truth, couldn’t keep me in the loop on the most basic aspects of his life, I was done. Not dealing with it. So I quit.”

“The job?” Sam asked in surprise.

“Yes. I was CEO by then. Told him I was through, I couldn’t take the stress or the bullshit any longer. And he kissed me. He told me later, he thought if he was going to lose me, he’d at least get in one kiss, that it would be worth it even if I punched him for it.” She gave a sweet, dreamy smile. “Tony Stark, playboy, slept with supermodels and sex objects, desperate for a single kiss from me.”

“Wow.” That was… kind of romantic, Sam decided. Really romantic, for Tony Stark. Pepper herself seemed more an up-front, don’t waste my time, type than a romantic, herself.

“We sat down the next day and had a SERIOUS talk, and I stayed, and we got together, and that’s why he told you that keeping secrets from me pissed me off.”

“I can see your viewpoint.”

“That was my one demand. No more lies, no more half truths. I should warn you about that, he is a master of the half truth. He keeps me in the loop and tells me what he thinks and feels, or I walk. I do the same. We don’t agree a whole lot, but we can see each others’ viewpoint, always. So far it’s worked out really well.”

“Seems like a reasonable rule. You both seem happy.” More, it seemed like an honest, stable, supportive relationship, and everything Pepper and Tony had told him underlined it. Since Sam wasn’t a relationship counselor (yet, he thought gloomily), at this point, honest, stable, and supportive was his definition of healthy, for anyone he was working with. For as goofy as every damned one of them was, they all seemed to respect each other, which kept a whole lot of problems from even starting.

“We’re happier than I ever thought I would be, let alone with Tony Stark. If you’d told me ten years ago I’d be the CEO of SI, happily shackled up with Tony? I’d have laughed in your face.” She waved at their waiter. “I feel like dessert. Do you feel like blowing your diet? We need sugar. Something fattening and decadent.”

“Sure, sounds good.”

-A-

He had a table of grinning techs and scientists in front of him, and Phil would never admit it to anyone, but it was damned unnerving; he knew what this group was capable of, or thought he did. It
was especially unnerving first thing in the morning. He did not have nearly enough caffeine in his system for this. “So you’ve finished it?”

“Yes, with help from the peanut gallery.” Tony agreed, waving an arm toward Darcy, Jemma, and Betty. Later Phil would ask about that. It seemed like something he needed to know. “Skye and Jane too, but they’re back to their computer stuff. Probably saved me days-”

“Weeks.” Darcy put in.

“-of work.” Tony finished, glaring at her. “I may keep them on as slave labor.”

“In your dreams.” Darcy replied.

There, in the middle of the conference table, was their sensor package. It was a little smaller than a milk crate, about the same cube-like dimensions, and entirely smooth and black. There were handles – he assumed handles – sticking out along each edge.

“All right.” Phil decided. “Where’s an uninhabited area we can do a test run on?”

“Due north. Up past Quebec City there’s a whole lot of nothing; I’ll fly along with Thor, do a scan for people, we’ll find an uninhabited area, shouldn’t be too hard. Might do a quick flyover of the Manicouagan crater while we're there, I think Thor would get a kick out of it.”

“All right. Do it.”

Tony nodded. “Uh, when?”

“Now.”

Tony blinked. “Okey dokey. I’ll grab Thor.”

-A-

They left New York air space at a fairly low speed. For now, Tony carried the sensors, locked into one fist, and they were headed north, as planned. Tony was in his standard armor, not the stealth version. Thor was in his usual; boots, jeans, tee shirt. Allowing for higher altitude, he’d put on a fleece pullover. Having him flying along in street clothes was definitely worth a double-take or five. Tony secretly took some photos and sent them to Jane. He got back about six dozen laughing emojis and ‘thanks for that, framing it’.

“We have about three hours for this; I’ve got a thing I need to do tonight. How fast can you go?” Tony asked Thor somewhere over the Hudson River.

“Quite? I do not understand Midgardian speed measurements. Once we are free of heavy air traffic, begin to accelerate, and let us see.”

Turned out Thor could go a little over Mach Two, which was hilarious, and they spent at least twenty minutes arguing over whether using the speed of sound to measure the speed of solid objects was a good idea. Thor thought it was stupid, but was too polite to say it that bluntly. Then he told Thor how they also used the speed of light as a measurement, and he did know that from Jane; they argued the rest of the way there about relativity the electromagnetic spectrum and its effects on measurements and WOW did Thor know a lot. Especially when considering Thor only got the basic ‘you’re going to be ruling the planet and need not to sound like an idiot’ levels of the sciences on Asgard. His intensive studies had been on governance, of course. From how he described it, basically by his society’s standards he had a solid high school science understanding, with the little
more that he picked up hanging around with smart people in several dimensions.

He was going to be dragging Thor into more trouble-shooting and idea sessions in the lab. Dude Knew Stuff.

“Okay.” They were hovering over an area west of the crater, where Tony was picking up an assload of large life signs that JARVIS was relatively sure were bear and deer; there were few roads, no buildings, and no cars. It was as good as they were going to get without going all the way to the north pole, and he did not have the time. Plus there was nothing interesting for the sensors to find in an endless plane of ice. “Remember how I explained it, with passes, we can merge the images—”

“As Darcy would say, I am not a moron, my friend.” Thor patted Tony’s armor on one shoulder. “Let us see.” He took the sensor package in his left hand, and Tony stayed where he was while Thor flew a solid, accurate creeping line pattern search, out and back, four times. He returned, handed back the sensors, and they took a quick scenic flight over the crater lake before heading back home.

Thor thought the crater was fascinating. So there.

-A-

“So what did you get?” He asked, staring at the black box sitting on the conference table.

Tony, straight out of his armor with his hair in all directions, rolled his eyes. “We don’t know yet, I have to download the data.”

“It doesn’t talk to JARVIS or anything?” Steve asked.

“No. The more frequency emission, the more likely to get noticed. It’s already blasting out X-rays and some other shit, we don’t need it screaming in regular communications frequencies, too.” Tony shifted the box, opened a hatch, and began plugging wires from the table (the hell?) into it. “I made it as quiet as possible, electromagnetically speaking, which means hard-wire downloads after the fact.”

On the wall screen, a topographical map appeared of a rural area full of forests. “There’s our zone.” Tony told them all. He flipped a few switches, typed on the touch-keypad in front of him on the table, and… data bloomed.

There were overlays on the map, showing life forms over one hundred pounds, tagged ‘probably deer’ and ‘probably bears’. Roads showed up as smears of petrochemicals; the sensors were mostly scanning for base elements and related chemistry, so the sensors ‘saw’ the hydrocarbons used for pavement. Along a rail line running east to west, colors sparkled. “What’s that?” Steve asked, pointing.

Tony frowned, typing, zooming in. He suddenly grinned. “That is the evidence that this thing works. Rail cars hauling ore have dropped little bits of it over time, and we’ve got a list of Quebec’s natural resources laying on the ground along the tracks. Titanium, iron, nickel. Every metal mined in the area is there. I can give you a breakdown by percentages, but the point is that the sensors worked and found it. Those are also at fairly low concentration, so we’ve got a more sensitive scanner than I expected. Leo’s idea worked. Go us. Go, Leo.”

Everyone applauded. Steve joined in.

“How soon can you two do the real flyover?” Phil asked.

“Tomorrow.” Tony said instantly. Thor nodded in agreement. “I have a thing tonight. It’s bullshit, but there’s another gala and Pepper, Steve, and I need to be seen at it. Steve especially. There are
rumors on line that he’s dead, and they’re picking up steam. We’ll look like good, upstanding citizens, and put to rest a lot of insane rumors at the same time.”

Steve sighed. “You didn’t tell me, and I don’t have anything to wear.”

“You tux was delivered, it’s in your apartment. I had the tailors start on it last week.”

“You didn’t tell me.” Steve repeated.

“Right. Any other thoughts, comments? Questions?” Phil asked everyone else, ignoring Steve and Tony.

No one answered.

“All right then.”

“Sorry.” Tony muttered. “This week’s been kinda nuts. For what it’s worth, I thought I mentioned it.”

Steve sighed. “All right, all right.”

He went to take a shower and put on another goddamn tuxedo, rather than spend his evening bickering with Bucky like he’d planned.

-A-

Turned out he got in the bickering, anyway. Short form.

“Dinner and a gala event.” Bucky repeated. “With Tony fucking Stark and Pepper Potts.”

Steve ignored him, fussing with his stupid hair, until Bucky shoved him down on the toilet lid, got a brush and some hair goo, and got to work. “I’m the bodyguard. You do remember the last gala, two weeks ago.”

“I don’t think anyone’s forgetting that one soon, punk.”

Yeah, he wasn’t either. He was wearing new body armor under his tuxedo; Tony must have made it, and Steve found it hanging on a hanger in the garment bag with his new tux, no comment provided. He’d put it on with his undershirt, and was now trying to make his hair look less like a rat’s nest- He looked in the mirror. “I am not wearing my hair like that.”

Buck slapped at his hand when he reached up to fix it. “Yes you are. You walk around here looking like a dork; you need to up your game if you’re dating Stark and Potts.”

Steve’s knees went out and he dropped back onto the toilet lid. Buck had always seen right through him. “I’m not dating either one of them, I’m the bodyguard.”

“You’ve always had a thing for mouthy brunets and Potts is a goddess. They’re pretty much perfect for you. Even a man and a woman, variety for you.” Buck combed his fingers through Steve’s hair a couple times. “There you go.”

Steve looked in the mirror. “How the hell did you learn that?”

“YouTube. Everything you need to navigate the modern world has at least one YouTube tutorial. You should try it.”
Steve couldn’t tell if he was joking, and went out to his room to get dressed.

Buck followed, dropped down into the easy chair Sam usually took, and said “So Stark and Potts.”

Steve fought the urge to beat his head on the wall (or his fist on Bucky), and settled for fussing with the new dress set that had appeared with the tux; silver and blue crystal shirt studs and cuff links. They were flashier than his usual, but they were a gift, after all. He wondered if Pepper or Tony had thought of them, and then shoved the thought away, hard. “Tony doesn’t even LIKE me. I’m along for safety. I started doing this for them after the kidnapping attempt on Pepper.”

“Potts is indestructible and Stark is like a cockroach. They don’t need a bodyguard.”

He was not having this conversation. There was no point to it, nothing was happening, so his feelings on the subject did not matter. And he didn’t care WHAT Sam said, talking stuff out did not always make it better. “Leave it.”

“Oh hell no, I’m not leaving it. No one else around here will call you on this shit. It’s my new job, not letting you weasel out. What’s the deal?”

Steve tried to glare while pulling on his pants. It was difficult. “They’re together, and Tony doesn’t like me. Are you getting this? I’m sure as hell not poaching, and if I tried Pepper would break my jaw. Literally. I would let her. It is going nowhere. There is nothing to discuss.”

“Talk or I’m calling Sam.”

“You are such an asshole. How did I forget what an asshole you are?”

“Frostbite in your brain. Talk.”

Steve dropped on the bed. “I’ve always had a thing for mouthy brunets and Pepper’s a goddess. Do I look dead? Of COURSE I’m attracted. Haven’t gotten laid since I got out of the ice because I didn’t want it on social media, dating is a joke at best in this century, and I’m sick to death of people wanting to fuck Captain America. That hasn’t changed; people still want to and I still hate it. It’s not just the physical stuff, though. I enjoy spending time with them. You know intelligence and humor were always my thing.” He was refusing to think of what a threesome with them would be like because he needed to be coherent, in their presence, every day.

“At least you’ve admitted it to yourself.” Buck grumbled. “Why do you think Stark doesn’t like you?”

“Well, at our first meeting, we barely spoke. At the second meeting, I told him to put on the suit so we could beat the shit out of each other. Or try. He told me everything special about me came out of a bottle. We apologized later, but we were more apologizing for being assholes than what we said; we both meant it at the time. I didn’t do any better. I told him without the suit he was nobody.”

Buck laughed. “You always say the most stupid shit when you’re angry.”

“Oh, shut up. Things didn’t improve, we mostly stayed out of each others’ way after the Invasion. Then Pepper needed me and there I was, helping the most important person in his life when he couldn’t. He wanted to tear me limb from limb. I don’t blame him. When he had his surgery I stayed, functioned as the focus of all his frustration so Pepper didn’t have to, and then bugged out, left them alone. Then he turns around and gives us all a home, helps you. I’ve thanked him a couple times, he shrugs it off, doesn’t want to hear it. I stay out of his way. Least I can do.” He considered the wisdom, then because it was Bucky, added, “he is also hetero. Straight. Into women. Whatever the hell term is currently being used. About fell over when I asked him to dance.”
“Nah, he’s bi. Fooled around some with men when he was younger, enough I don’t think he was just trying it out. Howard paid to keep it out of the papers, but it’s in the Hydra files. Don’t know if he stopped or got better at discretion.”

Steve blinked at that. What?

“What about Potts?”

Maybe punching Bucky in the face would end the discussion. Unfortunately, Steve didn’t have the time for a brawl. He got back up, started work on his tie. “Pepper is in love with Tony and deliriously happy with him. Because I care about her, I am doing nothing to fuck that up and make her unhappy.”

“So you’re gonna mope around the Tower.”

“Who is moping?”

“You said yourself you haven’t been laid in donkey’s years.”

“Getting laid is not the cure to whatever the hell mood I’ve been in that you’re complaining about. Find me someone who without doubt won’t blab to social media, and we’ll talk.”

“Darcy. Another mouthy brunet for you.”

“She thinks of me as a friend. I asked.”

Buck started laughing.

He didn’t stop.

With as much dignity as he could muster, Steve put on his shoes, pulled on his jacket, and walked out of the apartment, with a last shout of “JERK!”

He really wished he had a door to slam.

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