Iron Man 3: The Winter Soldier

by HepG2

Summary

Threat is imminent. Tony Stark and Steve Rogers find themselves caught in a web of lies and betrayals, without allies, without respite. Right is not right anymore when Hydra runs the very government they pledge their allegiance to. Forced to go on the run, they commit to restore honour to the Dream they vow to serve, and to remove the stain that is Hydra from the foundation this country is built on.

And then, he whom they thought is dead, comes back. They call him the Winter Soldier. Steve calls him his brother. His family. Steve wants to save him, and Tony sympathises. Christ, his heart is not made of stone. And it bleeds anew when he finds out what's hidden in Zola's bunker at Camp Lehigh.

Sometimes... right is just not right anymore.

[Movie mash up between Iron Man 3 and Captain America: The Winter Soldier]
Hello, beautiful people! Welcome back, and thank you so much for your patience after the conclusion of IM2: The First Avenger in March four months ago. Or welcome, if you're new to the family! We have virtual cushions and popcrons, come and grab some! I hope you'll like this round of movie mesh-up! Since Steve and Tony both went on a run in their individual movies, why not merge them together and make it a team-up yeah? It's only natural for both of them to seek out each other's help when shit hits the fan, no? Consider this a movie merging AU, or plotfill AU... I think it's kind of both XD I hope you'll enjoy this~~ thank you!
“Focus up, ladies. Good evening, and welcome to the birthing suit. I’m pleased to announce the imminent arrival of your bouncing, badass, baby brother.”

Welcome to his temple. This is where he prostrates himself before the majesty of bleeding edge science and technology, where humanity on the whole takes another tiny step forward. He stands steadfast on the dais, arms outstretched. His audience is his bots, his symphony provided by equally expensive and advanced Stark-ware. And he, the crafty maestro.

“Start tight and go wide, stamp in time. Mark 42 autonomous prehensile propulsion suit test. Initialise sequence.”

“Sir?”

“Buzzkill, J. Come on, send ‘em all.”

“Sir, I must bring to your attention Captain Rogers’ arrival on the premise.”

With a flick of his wrist, the dull hum of machineries dies down, and he steps off the dais. “Steve’s here?”

“Shall I open the door?”

“No, set the House Party Protocol on his ass – of course you open the door! How long have you made him stand outside, Jesus!”

The workshop automated door won’t open fast enough, so he turns his body sideway to slip through it, and then he bounds two steps at once all the way up to the foyer –

“Hey,” Steve begins to drop two gigantic duffel bags onto the floor.

“Hey.” Must’ve been quite a mission, whatever it is that Fury sics on Captain America two weeks
ago. Though his helmet hair and crumpled sweater doesn’t take away the overall… wholesome, handsome, youthful machoism from Steve Rogers, Tony still notes the slight edge in his voice, and agitation in his movement that translates to, “Let me guess, mission was major suckage?”

“I’ll use a different word, but –”

“Semantics. Everyone all right?”

“Yeah. No casualties.”

“Are you all right?”

Steve smiles wider, and the lines of fatigue miraculously ebbs away. Tony wants to take all the credit for that. “I’m fine. How’s your week?”

“Funny you would ask. Check this out!”

He tumbles down the stairs again, not even checking if Steve is following him – of course he would. He holds the door open, and Steve cocks his chin, wondering what in the world Anthony Edward Stark could possibly host in his basement workshop. Which really means, anything and everything. He walks past Tony and goes all the way to the dais, and Tony stops short of joining him there.

He tosses something at Steve’s head. “Put that on.”

Steve unfolds his fingers and studies what he just caught – a slim, nondescript metal bracelet that’s cold to the touch. Must’ve been left in the open for some time. “What’s this?”

“Put it on your wrist. There’s no catch, just slap it on.”

“What are you planning?”

“Just stand there! Wait for it…” This is going to be nothing short of awesome. Steve watches him goof around with a holographic control panel, his hands bracing his waist, feet tapping to the tune
Tony’s humming. “JARVIS, re-initialise sequence. Let’s switch things up a bit. Target to B2.”

JARVIS does not reply, and nothing else makes a peep for the matter, until something suddenly whizzes past Tony’s ear – even nicked him on the outer shell –

“Steve!”

Steve has leapt off the dais and is expertly punching and kicking at metal projectiles that for some reasons, are homing onto him. And they keep coming back, no matter how hard he fights.

“Tony!” He roundhouses something that looks like a boot, and it curves sharply right before it smashes into the pillar. “Shut them down!”

“Don’t fight them!”

“What?”

In Steve’s defence, it is quite insane not to fight back when being whaled on by a pair of reactor-charged titanium gold gauntlets and boots. Wait until Steve sees the codpiece.

“They’re pieces of Iron Man! I made it modular, so the suit latches on to you no matter what you’re doing at the time!”

Steve knuckles collide with Iron Man’s, and it cartwheels into the ceiling. “Great. Did you programme them to be this bloodthirsty? Because I can’t tell!”

“Yeah, that needs some recalibration. Uh,” Steve just backslaps the boot into his red Audi, “mind the property, honey.”

“Just shut it down!”

“JARVIS, cool it, will you?”
The collective hum settles down accordingly, and like sleepy bees, they hover contently mid-air. Steve heaves a sigh of relief. “Thank you.”

“Call them to you.”

“How do I do that?”

“Right arm out.”

Without any sense of self-preservation – or maybe he just trusts Tony a lot – Steve sticks his right arm out, and the right gauntlet floats over before it, opens up like a sandwich maker and closes again around Steve’s hand. The match is somewhat clunky, there are spots that feel too loose, and his ring finger feels pinched. Steve laughs a little as he admires his mechanical palm, and proceed to summoning the rest of the limbs to him.

“This can sure come in handy,” he eventually concurs. A compliment from Captain America? That’s worth a couple of honorary medals at least. “What model of the suit is it again?”

“Mark 42. You like it?”

“Love it. It’s supposed to fit you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. The armour techs are guarded by biometrics, so they only respond to me.”

“… Then, how is the armour on me?” Steve flexes his fingers again, making sure they’re really obeying his movements. “They’re responding to me.”

And Tony smirks, “Because I say so. I can also do… this!”

He flicks his own right hand – it now sports two rings around his middle and ring fingers, and a matching bracelet, all of which are decorated with red filigree instead of Steve’s blue – and the boots and gauntlets shoot away in opposite directions.
“Up!”

The boots roar into activity and hover higher in the air, until Steve is completely lifted off the ground. He’s stretched to a human “X”, and is obviously struggling to regain command of his limbs.

“Don’t bother, they really answer to me.”

“Not funny, Tony. Let me go.”

“Go higher.”

The boots hover higher and higher, until Steve’s crotch is at his eye level. He figures after two long weeks away and how frustrating it must’ve been for Steve – mission being a major suckage, as it usually goes – Tony thinks it’s only polite for him to do something nice for the good Captain.

“Tell me to stop, and I will. But if you don’t…” he undoes Steve’s belt buckle and pulls it free from his jeans. “I intend to go to town.”
“Wait, wait, wait!” Steve struggles futilely against the Iron Man shackles. What’s impressive is Tony can hear the gauntlets whirring overtime, that it takes quite an effort to hold Steve in place. At this rate, Steve might own his ass after he pry himself free. “I haven’t showered.”

“It’s fine.” Tony pulls the zip down and Steve’s cock springs immediately into view. Man has been walking around commando the entire journey from the Triskelion to Malibu? “It’s more than fine.” Tony grabs the hardened shaft and gives it a tug, and Steve stops fighting in his bondage. Even the sacs are irresistibly taut. Fret not then, for all this backlogged frustration will be masterfully handled.

“Tony –”

He shushes Steve down, and pulls the waistband to midthigh. Steve must be wanting this so bad, he’s leaking steadily that precum trails along the underside of his cock. Free lub? Waste not want not. So, he palms over the tip – yes, moan that moan again, Cap – and slathers it all over the length. Steve’s musk is particularly strong. Didn’t he read something about frequent ejaculation helps lower the risks for prostate cancer? Not that Steve needs the extra precautions. Despite being ninety-six, his prostate is probably healthier and younger than Tony’s own… which is not necessarily a bad thing because wear-and-tear is a real issue, darling.

“Something amusing?” Steve gasps from above him, and Tony quickly wipes off the stupid smirk he doesn’t realise he has on his face.

He pumps relentlessly, pushing Steve closer and closer to the edge. Half-lidded eyes, half-gaping mouth, chest fluttering like there is no air. Makes Tony want to tease him more. See him lose control. He supposes he can… blow Steve?

“Tony…”

His hand slows a fraction, and stops completely to cup Steve by his balls. Tony opens up, takes Steve whole in his mouth –

Something rattles and an engine goes bust. Something smells burnt and before he knows it, he’s pushed off the dais by a dead weight crashing down on him. His knee collides painfully with the
blunt edge of whatever it is – it sure hurts like hell, he’s too old for this crap –

“Tony, hey?”

A shadow lifts and he’s forcefully rolled over to his back. There’s Steve’s face hovering before him, and for some reasons, the mechanical, three-pronged limb of Dum-E, too. Tony tuts loudly and wearily slaps away its pincher – it’s trying to pick his nose – and sits up.

“Sorry, I uh, got too excited and I think I broke your suit.”

On cue, Dum-E brandishes the gauntlet that is now charred on the front side of the palm. Overheating, probably. It was getting hotter just now. Temperature climbing by the Celsius. Steve was practically melting in more than one way.

“Don’t worry about it, I’ve got spares.” Then, Dum-E bins the ruined gauntlet with a satisfying crash in the metal box that’s labelled “Scraps!”. “I swear, that bot just loves seeing my inventions fail.”

And then, Steve’s hand cups him gently by his jaw, and a thumb ghosts along the edge of his somewhat unkempt beard. “Come here,” Steve whispers, and Tony freely obeys. There’s teeth, lots of teeth – because they’re both grinning like idiots as their lips keep missing each other, but they just kept going. Tony runs his hand through Steve’s hair and finds it grainy, and the back of Steve’s neck is sticky with dried sweat. If he’s lucky. With Steve, “sticky” can mean anything from semen to alien blood.

“Missed you, Cap.”

Steve’s hand that’s still holding him still by his jawline slides downward, past his throat, past his collar, until it rests right atop the cold metal that is the arc reactor. “This gives you any problem lately?”

_This_ has given him quite a scare last season. “No, I don’t think so.” Tony sits up a little straighter. “Don’t jinx it.”

“I think about this sometimes when I’m away. Did you check if it’s still leaking metal into your blood?”
“Nope. Been clean since we exchanged palladium for Howardium. Yeah, I’m naming it after dear old pop.” It’s unlikely another specimen of Howardium can exist elsewhere. It takes quite an effort to synthesise it. As is the case with lithium dioxide, he’s glad he’s never dealing with them again. Once is quite enough. “You’re just sulking ‘cause I don’t have to drink that tonic anymore.”

Steve’s hand then travels downward. The lower it gets, the harder Tony’s heart beat against the housing of his arc reactor, until it slips right between his thighs to lightly cup at his crotch. “You obviously don’t need the tonic.”

“… Dirty talking. How refreshing. Or are you taking the mickey?”

Steve slides under Tony’s waistband, and he works on it furiously, no preamble, no holding back, and Tony finds himself shuddering against Steve’s broad frame, gasping for mercy. Touching him raw like that – there’s pleasure to be sought in his discomfort –

“Tissue,” he mutters desperately. “Tissue, Steve –”

Tissue be damned. He ejaculates all over his front, and Steve, completely unapologetic about making a mess in the workshop, proceeds to scooping the goop on Tony’s stomach into his palm, and slathers it over his own weeping cock. It’s really a shame that at this age, Tony’s refraction time is so appalling, so he only watches as Steve masturbates there and then. His sweater is in complete disarray, and the SHIELD T-shirt he wears underneath has ridden up to expose the sculpted muscles of his lower abdomen, clenching and unclenching with need.

The whole world is wrong about Steve. There is nothing wholesome about America’s favourite son. All of this, the lewd little sounds lacing Steve’s breath, the way his fist is pumping in his pants – all his. All Tony’s.

“Christ, you’re beautiful.”

Steve’s wrist twists downward and a puddle of wetness spreads across the front of his pants.

Forgive him, Father, for he has sinned. “I’m having some really nasty thoughts about you right now, Steve. Does that make me a bad person?”
“… You can join me in a cleansing ceremony in the showers.”

“Dick.”

Steve’s laughter is unbridled, and Tony misses having company in the mansion. There’s too much space for one man to prattle around. Ever since Steve returned to SHIELD to do Fury’s bidding, and ever since he completely relinquished his autonomy on Stark Industries, he returns to the basics and does what he does best, tinker. Pepper is thinking about making him CTO – so that means he’s very likely to be in the thick of things soon – but does he want to? Some time to himself isn’t so bad. He needs rest. Steve always says he needs to rest.

“How long are you staying, Steve?” He won’t say no to a staycation, either. “One day? One week? We can do something fun regardless.”

Then, Steve’s smile falters. “I’ll be leaving for New York again in a couple of days.”

“Sure.”

“I wonder if you want to come with me?”

“… Why not?” Pepper will be thrilled. “About time I pay the kids a visit at the Tower.” But, Steve is still troubled. The lines in his forehead speak volume. “Something else on you mind?” With Steve, it’s like playing a really, really tough charade. “Is this about the mission?”

A muscle in Steve’s cheek twitch. Bingo?

“You know, as much as I love to pry, but I respect confidentiality of matters sometimes – I know, shocking – so if you can’t discuss it, don’t.”

“… Frankly, I don’t think there’s even a mission to discuss.”

“Meaning?”
“I only know half of what I’m supposed to be doing.”

“… Meaning?”

Steve sighs, and it feels like he just dumped the weight of the world off his shoulders. “You must’ve read it in the papers. The Lemurian Star, hijacked by Algerian pirates? Securing that ship was our assignment. Apparently, it’s just an appendix in the mission report.”
Then Dum-E very kindly drops a thoroughly oiled rag onto Steve’s lap. Its pincers whirrs with excitement as Steve just sits there, doesn’t quite know what to do with it. Don’t underestimate that bot, it knows how to communicate though not nearly as eloquent as JARVIS. Dropping a dirty rag onto Steve’s lap can mean anything from you-stink-go-wash-up to oops-I-wasn’t-supposed-to-drop-that.

Tony takes the cloth off Steve and pulls him up by his underarm. “Come on, we can talk while we shower.”

Smooth.

They walk up four flights of stairs to use the bathroom attached to the master bedroom, not for want of more space – every other bathroom in this mansion is large enough for the purpose. It’s Tony’s mission to minimise his carbon footprint on this good earth that restricts his activities these days to mostly, his bedroom and the workshop. Renewable energy is fine and dandy, but habits and lifestyles have to change, too. Maybe he’ll ask Steve to give a talk about “Reduce, Reuse and Recycle!” in the coming Expo. People will listen to Captain America even when he’s talking about carpooling or planting more trees.

“The ship serves as a mobile satellite launch platform. It was sending up its last payload when pirates took them. STRIKE was mobilised ninety-three minutes later.” Steve pulls off the rest of his clothes and uses his soiled pants to wipe off residual semen off his thighs.

Tony quickly disguises his smirk with a shallow cough before Steve catches him. “Rather unusual target, I’ll say.”

“I checked. The only cargo registered was a satellite strapped to a rocket, now in orbit. The hangar was empty.”

“Nothing worth robbing, then. Whose satellites are those by the way? The Chinese?”

“SHIELD’s.”

Tony follows Steve into the bathroom, but stops short of joining him in the shower. He really needs a
trim... and his nostril hair is jutting out. He continues, “If they’re not robbing the ship, think… holding it ransom.” Steve starts the shower. “A bit too late to the party, though. Nine-three minutes too late. Those pirates should consider firing their event manager. How many of them again?”


“Doesn’t change the fact that the satellite they were supposed to hold ransom was already launched. *Unless*…”

“No one with clearance level above four was on deck, except for one Agent. Still, unlikely that they were gunning for anyone SHIELD.” The shower screen slides open and Tony looks up into the mirror, razor already poised for a quick shave. “Can you pass me the shampoo, please? Can’t find any here.”

“Always so polite. Is anti-dandruff good?”

“Anything’s fine. Thank you.” Steve closes the shower screen again, and continues to shower. When did things get so domestic between them?

“… I forgot you got skin so perfect, acne is just a four-letter word to you.” Tony feels like his life is just about to be flipped a hundred and eighty, yet he’s smiling at that idea. “Anyway, all in all, a rather straightforward mission. *Weird*, but a cakewalk for the Captain, no? You rescued some hostages, arrested some pirates, no casualties, no losses. No real reason to get all sulky now, is there?”

“I’m not sulking, Tony.”

“Sure you are.”

Steve emerges thoroughly wet and naked, and he pads across the bathroom to join Tony by the sink. Somehow, he’s managed to tie a small towel around his waist to upkeep his modesty. An unnecessary effort, to be honest. “An Agent abandoned post to mess around with the computers in the engine room.”
“Do you know what they were doing? Were they trying to get past SHIELD’s firewall, or maybe porn was on —”

“She was downloading something onto a drive.”

Tony washes his face and towels his chin dry. “Interesting. Let me guess, you’re not pissed off because some lady isn’t obeying your instructions. I’m gonna go one step ahead and assume she’s doing that on someone else’s order. And you weren’t informed about it.” Steve huffs indignantly, and applies toothpaste on a spare new toothbrush he finds in the cabinet above. “Sounds like you’ve been had.”

“I can’t lead a mission when the people I’m leading have missions of their own.”

“It’s called compartmentalisation.” Steve turns to glare at him, furiously brushing his teeth as he does so. “Some businesses believe that it’s the best way to protect company secrets. Nobody spills anything if nobody knows them all, right? Now, you hear it from me — it’s divisive, it’s disempowering. Not a fan of compartmentalisation, personally. When people really want to spill the beans, they’ll get creative. I find company loyalty the best gag.”

Then, the furious scrubbing against Steve’s molars fades into gentle sweeps. Foam starts dripping down his chin as he looks at Tony like he’s just grown horns.

“What? Something on my face?”

“No. You’re… you’re really something else, aren’t you?”

“I’m a lot of things, Steve. Where have you been?”

They have technically two short nights together before they head back to New York, and evening is already drawing close. Tony has like twenty ideas in his noggin about the next shield enhancements, all of which sounds tremendously exhausting to talk about. Steve looks like he’s rearing to go — when is he never, anyway? But having Steve’s corporeal form in front of him is like staring down a pendulum.

“When did you last sleep, anyway? You look like you’re ready to drop.”
“Very astute observation.” He is ready to drop. He hasn’t slept in two days. “I didn’t know you were coming back today.”

“I try to give you a heads up, but –”

“It’s fine, not a problem. Look, it’s probably only four thirty or something, wake me up in a couple of hours. We can have dinner, catch up. It’s not nice to leave my guest alone at night, is it? Maybe we can arrange a slot or two for your first scientific seminar at the Expo about energy conservation, OK?”

“What?”

“Yep, done deal.”

They say, absence makes the heart grow fonder. As he waves Steve away and clambers into his bed, he’s already looking forward to waking up.
Chapter 4

And then, and then, and then, Monday happens. Pepper is so looking forward to receiving them that she’s gone ahead and arranged for the company’s jet to pick them up sharp at eight in the morning. She was going to plan a luncheon with those folks in Long Island to welcome Tony’s homecoming, and that’s where he draws the line because, “It’s still your show, Pepper. You’re still CEO.” He may not be dying anytime soon, but he’s serious about passing the torch to her. Nevertheless, like he said, he won’t say no to CTO, and knowing Pepper, it’s an arrangement that’s probably already in the pipeline.

Apparently, SHIELD’s enthusiasm at meeting them tops even Pepper’s – and that’s a feat. They have a black SUV idling by the hangar to pick Steve up. Poor Tony has to drive his fluffy ass down to the Tower himself. Now companionless, he drives all forty-five minutes of it in silence. He finally pulls up at the vacated CEO parking spot – he’s not being a dick, if Pepper Potts is pointing at said spot and mouthing “park there!”, he obeys.

“Pepper, so good to see you,” he pecks her on the cheek as she comes to greet him.

“Oh, Tony,” she hugs him back, and he realises it has been a while since he last saw her. Last time, things were going boom all around and there were problems, they rhyme with “Vanko”. “Are you OK?”

“Yeah, why won’t I be?”

“I don’t know!” She flattens the front of his jacket with jittery fingers. “I don’t know if you’re planning something dangerous right now – maybe you’re packing C4’s in your trunk, I’m not surprised. Maybe someone’s planning to blow up your house on national TV and I can’t even –”

“I’ll have to stop you right there, yes? Pepper, Pepper,” he takes her hands gently in his, and she frowns a little. “OK, breathe. Come on, humour me. Breathe, hoo…” It makes her look like she’s giving birth, but that’s fine, too. Pepper being nervous makes him nervous. “Better?”

She shakes her head.

“It’s OK. Delayed effects, it’ll work in an hour. Anyway, I’ve just decided to spend some time in New York. I’ve got a bunch of new prototypes to test in the range, and I bet those aeronautics guys are dying to show us their demo.”
He’s here on a mission. He’s here to work. He thinks what transpired previously is his wake-up call to the possibilities of achieving so much more. He has to earn this lifeline. Back then, he thought it was over for him, and he wanted Pepper to live his dreams for him. Well, he still wants that for her too, but he’s still here, and he can help.

Seriously, that death scare works wonders. Everyone ought to try it sometimes.

“I’ve some proposals for you to go through,” Pepper says, and her heels tap away on polished marble as she leads him the way. “My office?”

“Sure. Whoa.”

He gets that it’s been a while, and already the foyer is unrecognisable. There’s a huge canvas portrait of Howard Stark mounted on the wall where the plaque “Stark Industries” used to be behind the receptionist. He eyeballs the work of art and estimates it to measure three stories high by the length of two Lamborghini.

“That’s a bit ostentatious, even for you. Especially for you.”

“There’s a lot of interest in the company’s mission and future direction after the Expo. Some people remember what your father wanted for the country post-War, and they have their eyes set on the next prototypes we’re rolling out from our labs.”

“No more weapons.”

“No more weapons,” Pepper agrees, and she tucks a stray strand of strawberry blonde hair behind her ear. “How are you really, Tony?”

“Why?” He tears his eyes away from Howard’s acrylic eyebrows. “Is something wrong?”

“It’s Steve. He says –”

“Ah, Steve.” Judging by the way Pepper is eyeing the arc reactor that’s not visible under his three-
piece suit, he guesses somebody can’t keep his mouth shut about him currently-not-dying a couple of months ago. “Whatever he told you, it’s over. I’m fine. Pink of health.”

He was careful about that palladium poisoning episode. Imagine if word gets out about the ailing then-CEO. Short sellers will be dumping their stocks like hot coal, driving down company’s worth, and forcing Pepper to either pump more money into the market to save it, or turn it over to some conniving assholes with the dough. And that’s probably the best-case-scenario. If word gets out that Iron Man is incapacitated, it’s anarchy. It might get bad enough that Fury decides he is the country’s best-suited benevolent dictator and nuke Capitol Hill after brunch.

“Steve said the arc reactor gave you some problem the last few weeks. Nothing some painkillers won’t fix, but he told me to watch you while he’s away on SHIELD duty.”

“… That sounds like him.”

“I’m glad, Tony. I’m really glad he’s with you.”

“You make it sound like we’re married.”

“He’s practically family.”

Tony scoffs. “Family, yes. To my old man.” He glances again at Howard’s portrait. “Anyway, you said you have work stuff to talk about. I’m all about work stuff today, Pep. Hit me.”

“Remember Steve’s proposal about an integrated surveillance system for the Tower and the Expo?” She pulls out a palm-sized tablet from her pocket and activates its holographic display. He sees the familiar 3D modelling of Stark Tower. Certain aspects of it are highlighted in red. Those are Steve’s audacious doodles of improvement over the Tower’s blueprint.

“What about it?”

“Somebody wants to buy it.”

“The Tower?”
“The security system, Tony! Pay attention!”

“Well, tough. I haven’t had time to implement it fully. And the algorithm hasn’t even been debugged.” He offs the tablet and pushes it back to Pepper. “By the way, we never discussed this with outsiders, right? How did this get out? Who’s interested?”

“… SHIELD.”
Coldly, Tony comments, “I might need to have a word with Captain Rogers,” and walks to the elevator. They’ll want to take this conversation somewhere private.

“Don’t tell me you can’t see the ingenuity in this system.”

“I can see the ingenuity in it just fine.” The door opens to admit them, and two other interns who seem pallid with starstruck. Sure, as long as they don’t ask him to sign their Converse.

“Hi, Mr Stark,” one of them stammers out.

“Hey,” Tony offers a hand, and they shake it, palms as cold as ice. “Where are you from? Any interesting projects I should hear about?”

The interns get off at level thirty, and Tony and Pepper continue their journey to the topmost floor in uncomfortable silence. She’s like a pressurised geyser waiting to go off despite a well-placed dignified smile. He on the other hand doesn’t have to feign nonchalance because he is nonchalant about this. His mind is already made up.

The elevator pings and he steps out of it first, Pepper hot on his heels. “A contract with SHIELD is not like with the military.”

“Maybe not, but this smells like one.”

“That’s not what you said about the repulsor engines. If I recall correctly, you gave me an energy bar for a job well done after you signed that contract.”

“That’s different. Those repulsor engines aren’t weapons. They just make things fly more efficiently, and I’m game for anything that helps reduce carbon footprint. And let’s be honest, the original rotating blades on the Helicarriers are so ‘Final Destination’ they make me super gassy just thinking about them.”

They walk to the mahogany table that was once Tony’s for over a decade. He caresses the polished
edge with his knuckle and promptly sits in the guest chair facing the executive’s. Boy, what a vista. Can’t believe he spent all those years working with his back against New York skyline. And Pepper must have settled in nicely in her CEO position, just look at how she’s personalised the workspace!

She eventually comes to stand beside him, her hip leaning against the table.

“If you want to come back,” she begins slowly.

“Nope. You’re doing a fine job, Pep. More than fine. Stark Industries is yours to run as you see fit. I’m very happy where I am now.”

“CTO, then?”

“Where do I sign?”

See?

“Legal is pouring over the final details of the contract. I’ll call you when it’s ready.”

Already in the pipeline.

“So, coming back to this issue,” Pepper pops out the tablet again and places it on the table. “The company is interested in negotiating with SHIELD.”

“No deal.”

“I’ve studied the blueprints, Tony.” She turns on the tablet and magnifies the holograph big enough that Steve’s old notes on the periphery are legible. “There are no red flags. It’s an integrated visual and audio monitoring system with enhanced target or threat detection and identification –”

“– that can be easily abused –”
“– that will improve security on the national level, and this is SHIELD. We can trust them.”

His chair creaks as he leans into it. “Why am I getting this vibe that you’re on very friendly terms with SHIELD?”

“You trust SHIELD with your health.” Tony’s knuckle raps exceptionally hard on the table at that. “I’m just taking a leaf from your book.”

“What else did Steve tell you? The colour of my Tuesday underwear perhaps?”

Her nostrils flare, and Tony’s not sorry. “He said to call Dr Streiten from SHIELD medical if your symptoms get worse. I asked him what was going on with you, and he said you’ll tell me yourself when the time comes. Clearly, you’re not about to, so I’m gonna pretend it was a… a cold, or some high-tech STD, I don’t care – but the fact is, you trusted SHIELD more than me –”

“You know that’s not true –”

“First, you gave away your company, then Steve looked like he was going to cry when he talked about it –”

“I’m fine. I’m fine, and that’s the truth. This here?” He taps at his arc reactor through his clothes, and Pepper pinches the bridge of her nose. “Brand new. It’s got a new element. Much better than palladium, and I’m calling it… Howardium. Nifty, huh?”

She smiles a little, but there’s still lingering grief in her eyes. “Can we patent that?”

“Jesus Christ.”

He indulges in Pepper’s laughter, as fluffy as freshly whipped omelette. He really needs to do better. He’s probably the cause of most of her ulcers.

“Think about it, Tony. Your programme enhances facial and vocal recognition, capable of tracking unique characteristics like walking gaits and speech pattern to generate identity fingerprints with high fidelity by using a network of CCTVs. It’s not perfect. I’m not sure if cosmetic alterations and good acting can fool your cameras, but it’s better than what we have at the moment.”
“That’s why it’s dangerous, Pep. With that kind of information, it takes only a second to crawl the Net and match that face to a name, or a phone number, or an address – and with the rampanty of personal information sharing on social media, GPS that work twenty-four-seven – there’s not one place a person can be that we won’t know about. You might want to check with Steve what he thinks about a clear breach of privacy and liberty.”

“I bet the Interpol would love to get their hands on that.”

“Well? Tell them it’s nothing but a pipedream.”

“The technology is here.”

“So is Iron Man. There are lines we cannot cross.”

And then, the holograph between them shrinks to thin air, replaced by Bambi’s head. She takes one long, hard look at Tony before breaking into the hugest grin. “Oh, Mr Stark! I thought Captain Rogers was mistaken! You are back in New York. How do you do, Sir?”

“Well, Bambi, thank you.” He should take her out for lunch sometime. She’s been such a dear to Pepper, helping her out at work, the Yang to Tony’s Yin at managing Pepper’s temper. “Did you mention Captain Rogers?”

“Yes! He’s here at the foyer. He tells me not to bother you, but I thought you’ll want to know.”

“OK, thank you. I’ll be right there,” and he wordlessly nods at Pepper, who nods back. “Let him know I’m on my way, will you?”
Chapter 6

Steve is where Bambi says he is, loitering around the foyer, still as fresh-looking as the last time Tony sends him packing into S.H.I.E.L.D.’s SUV. He too is admiring Howard’s portrait. It’s not exactly easy to ignore it. Very in-the-face. While Tony looks at Howard with indifference, Steve’s visage is anything but. Entirely understandable, in theory. Howard spent more time looking for Steve in the waters than he did raising his own son. He might’ve given up on Steve at some point, but he pretty much given up on a lot of things by then, and Tony had become too cynical to care.

“Tony,” Steve greets him. The inflection in his voice suggests he isn’t expecting Tony to meet him so soon. “I told Bambi not to bother you.”

“We were almost done anyway. Everything all right with Nick?”

“Later,” he replies dismissively, and gestures at Howard’s portrait. “This is very well done.”

Something goes pop! in the back of Tony’s mind. “You like painting. You can appreciate the art.”

“Very bold brushstrokes.”

And then, a holographic Iron Man comes swooping down from a corner, and it zips past the portrait without so much as a second glance. Tony turns on his heels and makes for the exit. “Bold, huh? Exactly what we need in the Tower. Me and my Dad comparing dick sizes.”

“Tony, I… if I may? Can we visit their graves?”

Tony skids to a halt and Steve almost walks right into him. Nobody ever suggested visiting the Starks at the family cemetery. Tony himself hasn’t been there in years. But, he can do this. He has time to indulge Steve like this. On the way there, he stops by the florist to buy five stalks of pink carnations, packed with Baby’s Breath all held together with a white satin ribbon. Steve notices Tony doesn’t flirt with the young lady as he hands her a bill.

Steve’s next surprise comes in the shape of the Maria Stark Foundation main complex. Tony parks the car near the courtyard, and Steve, still unsure of why they’re here, merely follows Tony through a wrought iron gate and archway, past some carved stone angels, and then, a sea of marble headstones.
Despite not having returned in years, Tony knows exactly where his parents are. He turns sharply to the right after the first row of ancestors. The garden, sombre it may be, is manicured, very well kept. It’s also deathly quiet, as if to welcome Stark’s last heir into the fold.

Tony lays his bouquet before a tall, white gravestone cross.

“Hey, Mom. Been a while,” he says. Steve comes to stand beside him, and reads the engravings: Life’s race well run, life’s work well done, life’s victory won, now cometh rest. It’s a shared grave, so not one to be disrespectful of his father, Tony glances sideways at Steve and says, “Hey, Dad. We found Rogers.”

Even then, he keeps his gaze fixed on Maria’s name, eyes glazing over and don’t blink. It’s a sorrowful sight. Apt, but Steve doesn’t wish it upon him. To Steve, those twenty years since Howard’s passing are nothing. Timeless. He never knew Maria. Tony obviously loved her. Loves her. Steve never needed to grieve his old friend. Tony probably did half his lifetime.

“What did Nick want with you at the office?” Tony suddenly asks. “It’s about the Lemurian Star, isn’t it?”

“Yes.” Steve’s glad there’s chatter to fill up the gaps. “I asked him about these secret missions he sent us on. He said, he didn’t want me doing anything I wasn’t comfortable with. Some Agents are comfortable with everything.”

“Right.”

“Have you heard of Project Insight?”

“No.” Tony hikes his pants up and squats. He starts picking up dried leaves scattered around the grave. “Sounds like one of SHIELD’s super-secret programmes.”

“I saw them myself. Three next generation Helicarriers synched to a network of targeting satellites. Guess where they were launched from?”

“… The Lemurian Star.”
“They’re developing an algorithm for Insight to choose its targets. Anyone with potential to be a threat. Our bank records, medical histories, voting patterns, e-mails, phone calls, SAT scores. This algorithm evaluates people’s past to predict their future. They plan to neutralise threats before they happen.”

“What’s your thoughts?”

“I thought the punishment usually comes after the crime. I stand by what I said to Nick, by holding a gun at everyone on Earth and calling it protection? This isn’t freedom. This is fear.”

Tony doesn’t comment for a long while. He deliberates while he continues picking his leaves and debris, and even uses his handkerchief – actually Steve’s, he gave it to Tony to mop up nosebleeds – to scrub off traces of mud over Maria’s name.

“Do you agree with Nick? With SHIELD?” Steve finally asks. He has to know.

Tony straightens up again, and this time, he watches the epitaph that’s carved under Howard’s name. “No. I get where they’re coming from, but we’re talking profiling here. I know a thing or two about that, believe me. I looked into it, figured if it was advantageous if we could, you know, pre-empt crimes, just like what your buddies in SHIELD are trying to do.”

“Tony, you –”

“It doesn’t work, OK?” Tony sighs, and runs his hand through his tussled hair. “There are tests done by the real experts. FBI profilers, police detectives, clinical psychologists, students. I only need to mine the available data and cook up a version two-point-oh, and I’m telling you, there’s no guarantee of predicting who would’ve done what. Profiling is just dressed-up astrology. Besides,” dried leaves crunch in his fist as it tightens, “even if they have such an algorithm, they still need the mechanism for target detection and identification. Unless you’re telling me their satellites can magically read people’s DNA from orbit, which I call bullshit –”

“You already have it,” Steve deadpans. He turns to face Tony fully. “You wrote it, as part of security overhaul for the Tower and the Expo.”

“Ah, funny how you still remember it.”
“Of course I do,” Steve frowns. “You ran the simulation yourself. It’s effective.”

“Yeah, but not on a national scale. For a split second, I did wonder if you planted that idea in my head on the pretext of beefing up security, so I would develop this on SHIELD’s behalf –”

“That’s bull –”

“Yeah, whatever.”

Something inside Steve snaps and he grips Tony by his shoulder, preventing him from walking away from such callous accusation. Tony’s reaction’s a given – he slaps away Steve’s offending hand and glares at him hard. But, just as suddenly as the temper flared, it ebbs. “I… this isn’t the best place to hang. I’m –” he clears his throat, and forces a quick smile. “Shall we go?”
Chapter 7

With due respect, dissing SHIELD in full view of its founder's resting place is bad taste. Steve wasn't around when SHIELD came about, and Tony was too young to remember its glory days. SHIELD no doubt has changed over the years, morphing from the idealistic peacekeeper it was when Howard and Peggy were helming it, to a more jaded, pragmatic one Fury now leads. For better or worse, it adapts. Only then can it survive the trial and tribulation of time.

And the world, cruel as it is, puts Steve on ice and preserves his forties’ virtues and ways. They call him old-fashioned. Should he change as the tide changes?

They exit the cemetery and cross the courtyard. Instead of going back to the car, Tony commandeers one of those park benches, inching to one end and leaving the other conspicuously empty. Steve settles in. They do have plenty to talk about.

“It’s interesting, watching you,” Tony starts, and he casually rests his arm on the back of the bench. “Not so long ago you were cool with SHIELD putting blinkers on you. Would do whatever they tell you to. They ask you to jump, you ask how high.”

“I get your point.”

“So?” Tony surveys a row of hydrangea with disinterest. “That’s some king-sized balls you showed Nick there, dressing him down like that. Sounds to me you just gave him your three months’ notice. Stark Industries is always hiring, by the way.”

“When I see something point south, I can’t ignore it.”

“Hey, I’m just thinking from your point of view. How would you define loyalty to the cause? Blind faith? Absolutely.”

“Profiling, possibilities.” Steve leans forward and interlocks his fingers over his knees. “Just one of many possible futures. Imagine if Insight profiled you two years ago, before Afghanistan.” Tony’s mouth twitch a bit. “I believe in second chances, Tony. I do. I believe in a person’s will to change.”

“I’m with you,” Tony eventually sighs. “Just thinking out loud, you might want to suggest SHIELD to hire precogs instead. I’ve heard some interesting rumours about kids with special abilities. Try
headhunting for some at Xavier’s School. I’m all for driving job creation.”

One more thing. What Stark Industries does, how it operates and conducts its businesses is frankly, none of Steve’s concern. It disturbs him now that he knows how vehemently Tony is against the principles of Insight, yet indispensable in bringing it to fruition. Does Tony even know this?

“Nick gave me a tour around Insight’s Bay. I saw your repulsor engines on Insight’s Helicarriers.”

There, that flinch. That sinking feeling and suspicion that Tony is about to give Nick hell for using his tech for Insight.

“You sold your engines to SHIELD,” Steve presses.

“… I did.”

“You didn’t know what they were for?”

“Quinjets, flying cars, who knows? I never expected Insight.”

“This isn’t right, Tony.”

“When has it ever, with SHIELD?”

Steve chuckles darkly. “Sounds to me you’ve been compartmentalised.”

“Leave SHIELD, Steve.” The bench trembles under their weight as Tony shifts his. “I mean it. If someone wants me to jump into a swimming pool, I’d like the water to be clear. SHIELD is as clear as tar. Haven’t you had enough, huh? Of Nick’s secrets’ secrets?”

“Should I walk away?”

“You damn well should. What else is there to stay for?”
“For as long as I can remember, I just wanted to do what was right. I guess I’m not quite sure what that is anymore.” Strange thoughts. He doesn’t give up. He never gives up! “And I thought I could throw myself back in and follow orders. Serve. It’s just not the same.”

“You’re always so dramatic.”

“I don’t know what I would do with myself if I get out.”

Tony lifts his arm from the bench’s back and folds it across his chest. “That’s why I’m here. You’re mighty useful, for a gramps.” Steve breaks a slight smile. “I said it once, I’ll say it again. You can do whatever you want to do. What makes you happy?”

Many moons ago, this is easy to answer. “Get to know New York again.” Like a child born anew, so many things to learn. And he learns quick. Nowadays, he’s as competent as a millennial just going through the simple life. Then, he learns about the Maslow’s Hierarchy, and he thought gee, there’s an actual solution to the mysteries of happiness? A cheer to the twenty-first century and its unending awesomeness! He thinks he fulfills the lowest rung of the pyramid – physiologic needs. He has more money in his bank account than he can use, food on his table, clothes on his back. He’s safe. Absence of war aside, there aren’t many threats formidable enough to take down a super-soldier on a normal Wednesday. Then, there’s the sociocultural dimension –

When he realizes he’s going through checkboxes to live his life, he knows he’s screwed. Fun was as simple as trading train fare for a hotdog, and ending up trekking halfway across the country to get back home. Self-actualisation was him standing up against an idiot who made too much noise in the cinema, and winding up with a broken nose for the trouble.

He owns many things now, and nothing.
Chapter 8

After that, Steve asks Tony to drop him off at his apartment, and Tony obliges. He hasn’t explicitly offered Steve to stay with him, but that goes without saying, right? Eventually, it occurs to him that he has to spell it out to the politest person on Earth who wouldn’t take anything for granted. So, he does the whole rigmarole – tells Steve that there’s always a room for him at the Tower, that he welcomes Steve’s company anytime.

Steve says nah.

OK, he can respect that. Every man needs time to stew alone in their own space. He drops Steve and his bags on the doorstep and drives back alone, and decides to check Steve off the to-worry-about list for the next two weeks.

And, what are the odds? There is no need to try so hard to worry about Steve after all, because his plate quickly fills up with trouble, and there’s a second helping lining up. He needs to schedule an appointment with Pepper to see her in her office, he has to then argue his point with her, which never happens, and it’s a great wake-up call to the fact that this is how it’s going to be when he’s not CEO anymore. As she puts it, “You may be the owner still, but this is no longer under your jurisdiction.”

Silver lining is, it’s nice to know that he still owns the company. It’s not a deliberate arrangement, by the way. He fully expects the shares he owns to be transferred to five charity funds as stipulated in his will – only, he didn’t die, did he? But man, it sucks, because even with all the money in his bank account, he’s no longer calling the shots. And he needs this specific shot called now.

“You need to cancel all business we have with SHIELD. Every one of them.”

“I said no, Tony. It doesn’t work this way anymore. You can’t barge in two p.m. on a Wednesday and demand a cease-and-desist on the company, no less.”

“No, not on the company. Just on specific technology that we’re selling to SHIELD.”

Pepper glances down at the piece of paper Tony has taken some time preparing over lunch. His chicken scratch-handwriting fills up a good portion of the first page, and nothing on the back. She folds it in half, and says, “You want us to stop selling these items to SHIELD?”
“Yep.”

“That’s everything that we’re selling to SHIELD.”

“… That’s the idea, yes.”

She rolls her eyes and marches furiously to her table. She takes her seat in the executive chair this time, and swirls it so her back is set resolutely against the window. “This is a multi-billion-dollar transaction. We spent two months negotiating a deal which you OK-ed yourself, and on the manufacturing side, we’re already filling up these orders. It’s too late to cancel anything now.”

“It was a serious lapse in judgment, all right?”

Pepper has the superpower of making him feel like a freaking onion. With her unwavering stare, she peels back his soul, layer by layer until he gives up evading and she drops the one question that really matters. “What are you not telling me?”

“I’ve a bad feeling about this.”

“No.” She pushes away the stack of folders on her table, so there’s absolutely nothing in between him and her, sans the mahogany table. “It’s always more than a hunch with you. What is it, really?”

“… Remember the repulsor engines we spoke about last time?”

“SHIELD uses them on their jets and cars. Cleaner energy. Efficient.”

“… Not really. Not anymore.” He checks the ceiling nervously, and leans forward in his seat. “SHIELD is working on a comprehensive surveillance, targeting and likely, elimination of potential threats on the global level. The repulsor engines are used to fly three Helicarriers – not yet combat ready, from what I understand – but when they are? Look.” His hand darts across the table to flatten out the paper Pepper carelessly places beside her mug. “Look at this. Most of these items are innocuous, but you really only need three things to get the party started, yeah?”

Speaking with Steve at the cemetery gave him a moment of clarity. *Insight* is the missing link. Fury
said it before, SHIELD needs him to complete his father’s work on the Tesseract. He knows as much that they didn’t share Howard’s logbook and save him from palladium poisoning because they were nice.

“My work on Howardium.” Pepper looks up questioningly, and he taps at his chest. “The new element. Near infinite-power source. With a little tweaking, it’s easy to weaponise. Iron Man’s a great example. Now that they have the guns, how are they going to track down targets they intend to vaporise?” His finger taps on the fifth item on the list. “The enhanced surveillance system for the Tower and Expo.”

Pepper still doesn’t look like she’s buying it. Granted, none of these are evidences.

“They know where they’re supposed to be pointing their guns at. But, how do they decide who to target? SHIELD is working on an algorithm to profile people based on their past actions. SHIELD will use this to predict crimes, and neutralise threats before they even happen.”

Innocent until proven guilty? Not anymore. This is in every way worse than having his head held underwater until he builds the Jericho because now, even dying won’t stop the baddies from winning.

“OK,” she says. And Tony almost falls off his chair.

“Really?”

“I believe you.”

“You do? I was expecting a lot more fight from you. I even blocked the rest of my evening for this.”

“We’ll have to compensate SHIELD for breach of contract.”

“No problem.” Money lost can be remade. Lives?

“The board won’t be too happy with this.”
“Since when do we care about their opinions anyway?”

“… I do, Tony.”

“Sure you do. And that is why, Miss Potts, you make a better CEO than I ever will be.” Suddenly, the very air in his lungs feels so much sweeter. “I owe you one, Pep. Thank you. For believing in me.”
Chapter 9

What has he done for Pepper to believe him so completely? As she walks him to the door, he wants to shake her hands, hug her, cherish her, apologise for being such a dick to her and swear he’ll bring something nice for her birthday. Something Jeff Koon. Something like a giant rabbit with boobs. True enough, an hour after that, she circulates a memo – what must be the first of many – announcing the decision amongst the C-suite. He parks himself in his private workshop and eyes the phone for a good five-minute, and after ten has passed, he receives a grand total of zero calls. Weird.

Coincidentally, Pepper leaves the Tower earlier that day. When he rings up Bambi at four and invites her to tea, he thinks she sounds a tad reproachful over the phone. Definitely weird.

Then a series of memo flies into his workshop and holy hell, after the first twenty Howlers of is-Stark-drunk-again and SI-needs-this-contract-period and we’re-not-paying-SHIELD-obscene-amount-of-money-as-compensation-is-Stark-available-for-comments, he too decides to shut down communications for the next sixteen hours. Is that’s why it’s been radio silence the whole afternoon? Because Pepper has been taking the brunt of the heat for him, and now that she’s left, he’s free game? Fair enough. For his part, he’ll be quiet, pretend he isn’t even here. Stark the dead possum. Let everybody cool down a bit. They’ll see sense in due time.

Still, evidence first, speculation second. Evidence of SHIELD plotting Doomsday that he yet has, and must furnish the board ASAP. Hear that sound? That’s him banging his forehead repeatedly into his keyboard. But he has to jump the gun. He can’t tolerate a second longer of SHIELD’s grubby paws on his tech, not when he suspects something is rotten in Denmark.

“Only one way to find out,” he mumbles as he taps away on his tablet. “JARVIS?”

“Yes, Sir?”

“And… go.” He runs his commands, and waits. This should either take less than ten seconds… or blow up spectacularly in his face. “How are we looking?”

Please don’t blow up in his face.

“… Welcome to Project Insight, Sir. What will be your next prompt?”
“Do what you always do, cover my tracks. Don’t let them have a whiff of my badass trespassing. I won’t be long here.” His screen divides into five separate windows, each reporting different aspects of Insight. “Finance, admin, R&D. Everything’s so neatly bundled. Who are these people? Taxidermists?”

“Taxonomists, Sir.”

“Pardon the Freudian slip.”

“… That’s not quite right, too, Sir.”

The third screen blinks red. Tony tries some of the passwords his keygen generated, but the section remains adamantly locked. “I’m blocked, J. Why am I blocked?”

“A quick analysis on Insight’s security programme indicates that files requiring level four clearance and above are guarded by biometrics. It’s impossible to bypass those with the amount of time we have left.” With that, JARVIS conveniently displays a countdown timer on the top right corner of Tony’s tablet, and it says they have three minutes left before someone picks up their trail.

“Right. Whose biometrics?”

“Secretary of World Security Council, Alexander Pierce, and Director of SHIELD, Nick Fury.”

“Fury, huh?” His name is everywhere. Not even trying to hide his little scheme. “Terminate programme. Get us out, J.”

The room sinks gradually into darkness as the tablet and projection of Insight’s content dissolves into nothingness. It’s not a completely waste of effort.

“Biometrics. So, I’m betting thumbprints or retina scans, but with SHIELD, it’s up for toss. Maybe it’s scalp patterning. Hair swirls. Oh, wait…”

“Would you like me to make an appointment with Colonel Fury, Sir?”
“… Yes. Might as well.” Fury owes him an explanation on the repulsor engines, at the very least. He didn’t say SHIELD could use them to fly three murderous Helicarriers until kingdom come. Stark Industries didn’t sign up to be part of a Nazi-like, eugenic, holier-than-thou –

“Sir, there is something you might want to see.”

In the next heartbeat, his tablet turns back on.

“Some people call me a terrorist. I consider myself a teacher. America, ready for another lesson.”

It’s six o’clock. Is this news? Whoever this geezer is – shooting his mouth off – he sure can rock that goatee and beard. He sits on a throne, his body basking in the shadows.

“Is this pre-recorded or live telecast?” Tony sits straighter in his chair.

“Pre-recorded, Sir.”

He smells cowardice from a mile away.

“In 1864 in Sand Creek Colorado, the US military waited till the friendly Cheyenne braves all gone hunting, waited to attack and slaughter their families left behind, and claim their land. Thirty-nine hours ago, the Ali Al Salem Air Base in Kuwait was attacked.”

“Confirm that.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“I… I did that. A quaint military church filled with wives and children, of course. The soldiers were out on manoeuvre. The braves were away. President Ellis, you continue to resist my attempts to educate you, Sir. And you, you’ve missed me again. You know who I am, you don’t know where I am.” Tony’s grip on his armrest tightens. “And you’ll never see me coming.”

“Sir, we have satellite footage of an airstrike launched on the Ali Al Salem Air Base forty hours ago.”
There is no rest for the wicked.
Chapter 10

“Would you like you to deploy Mark 17, Sir?”

He’ll be lying if that doesn’t shake him up a bit. What wars don’t? When the fire goes out and the ashes settle, there are only bodies to bag and bury. *That* is war to him. That’s the one tangible fact about war that doesn’t change no matter what holy crusade either side is championing. He stops manufacturing weapons, stops bathing his hands with blood after Afghanistan. It wasn’t enough. *Doing no harm is not good enough.* Being better is turning these tech into affordable, renewable energy to sustain the human species. He’s making amends. SHIELD just has to scoop these shards of broken dreams and make dog tags out of them.

Tony gets up from his chair so quickly he almost upsets it. “Mark 17? ‘Heartbreaker’. Artillery Level RT Suit *that* Mark 17?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“What do you expect me to do with it, J?”

“I’m expecting you to engage with the Mandarin in Kuwait, and I propose this suit to be most expedient for the cause.”

“No. Not this time –”

“May I recommend Mark 35 then, the Disaster Rescue Suit you named ‘Red Snapper’?”

“No! Christ, no, JARVIS, we are *not* engaging the Mandarin on foreign soil. Who’s the Mandarin anyway?”

“Homeland Security is investigating the hijacking of national airwaves and illegal broadcasting of the video. Preliminary reports implicate a terrorist faction known only as ‘the Mandarin’. Nothing much is known about him, only his intentions, that is, to ‘teach America a lesson’.”

“He made that plenty clear.” Tony does need one gadget – his cell phone, which he’d tossed
recklessly onto his in-tray on his workbench. “Wonder what SHIELD is up to these days?”

He isn’t about to take Iron Man out on a self-imposed search-and-rescue or counter-attack mission. He hasn’t been Iron Man-ing much – or at all – since Vanko. Speaking of which, he recalls the stink-eye French government gave him when he shoved said Russian terrorist into Monaco’s prison. Guess how happy the Kuwaiti government will be with him making a three-point landing at the US embassy’s courtyard? Point is, Iron Man isn’t a band-aid when mankind throws a tantrum. That’s SHIELD’s prerogative, and this is him doing SHIELD a favour by calling their hotline to politely alert them to trouble.

He speed-dials Steve, and proceeds to having his call rejected after three beeps. But it’s late evening. Steve should be off-duty. “JARVIS? Compile whatever you can find about this Mandarin guy, and save them on my private servers.”

“What do we do about the firewalls, Sir?”

“Uh,” he tries Steve’s number again. “No jumping over firewalls this time. Enough illegal activities for the day.” Steve kills his call again. “Come on…” He stows his phone in his pocket and grabs his jacket. He’s done, he’s leaving. It’s been a confusing day. He trusts SHIELD to save the world, he doesn’t trust SHIELD to save the world –

His phone rings when he already has one foot out of the door. Steve’s calling back.

“Steve?”

“Hey, sorry. It was uh,” Steve sounds weary on the other side. “Bad timing.”

“Everything OK?”

“… More or less. Anyway,” the tone of dismissal is obvious. “Anything up?”

“Yeah. I dug deeper into Insight,” Tony hears Steve sigh again. He will too if someone talks about Insight right before dinner. “It’s a long shot but hear me out. I’m thinking… there are three phases to Insight: identification, targeting, elimination. I went through Stark Industries’ contracts with SHIELD, and – might be coincidences – there are things that we’re manufacturing on the pretext of efficient transportation that could be – and likely, have been – repurposed for Insight.”
“Phase one, Stark’s surveillance system,” Steve chips in, his voice straining the words. “Phase three, repulsor engines and possibly guns based on Howard’s work on the Tesseract.” Without further prompting, Steve himself is drawing the same conclusion. His worries are justified. They’re not paranoia after all. “The missing link – phase two – is the crime prediction algorithm. It’s not ready yet. Insight isn’t completed.”

“Not for long.”

“Tony, these are not proofs. We can’t ask SHIELD to cancel Insight based on a hunch and then have a moral debate with —”

“With Nick. I know. But we have to.”

Steve goes noticeably quiet, and Tony takes advantage of it. “Nick’s biometrics is required to access and authorise the more sensitive aspects of Insight. He’s the one calling the shot. So, I feel like giving him a piece of my mind.” He needs to hammer home the importance of yelling at Fury a bit. They do not want those Helicarriers in the air.

“Nick’s been shot.”

He hears the words.

… He’s still computing them. That can’t be right.

Tony’s mind is still stuck at the ringing syllable of “shot” when Steve presses on, “We don’t know if he’s going to make it through the night.”

“Where are you?”

“DC. Sorry, I left without a message. It was urgent.”

“Which hospital?”
“It’s a four-hour drive, Tony.”

“I’m rescheduling my week. Which hospital?”

There’s a brief pause on Steve’s side, and he mutters, “George Washington University Hospital. *Bring a suit.*”

Then, he hangs up.
The problem about owning a suit of armour that breaks supersonic is the sheer temptation of doing exactly that, especially when he deems the situation justify it. Fury’s knocking on heaven’s door! Surely blazing through the sky in Mark 40 makes more sense than flooring his Audi R8 Coupe for all four hours from New York. Mark 40 is the fastest he has in the Iron Man armoury – the Hypervelocity Mark 40, nicknamed “Shotgun”. *Bring the suit,* Steve said, but there’s something in the way those words were gritted out that’s so foreboding, Tony thinks its wiser to play the fool and come disarming in peace.

He stays connected – online – and makes damn sure he’s contactable in every way possible. Any calls, any e-mails sent to the company, Malibu mansion or the Tower’s penthouse are re-routed to his tablet immediately. Just this one time, he’s taking all messages personally. For his trouble, JARVIS so kindly reminds him that the risks of crashing his car and dying should he continue to peruse his mobile devices while driving is up by twenty-three-fold. Nothing he can do about – his alert log is scrolling like a marquee. It’s cramming the RAM with a seamless influx of mostly threats to have him removed from SI unless he reinstates all contracts with SHIELD.

“OK, this is really too much,” he agrees as JARVIS reminds him of the afterlife for the sixteenth time. “Filter out everything from the company, unless it comes from Pepper.”

The Mandarin, and Fury. Priorities set right.

Miraculously, he makes it to the hospital in one piece, not even a dent on his car. He parks it haphazardly by the curb and only needs to follow the breadcrumbs SHIELD is dropping. Rows and rows of agents, all armed to the teeth, lining this one corridor that, according to the signage, leads to the operation theatre.

He rounds a corner and heaves a sigh of relief. Steve is seated on a bench, head bowed in prayer.

“Hey,” Tony greets, and joins him. One careless sweep over him and Tony notices blemishes on Steve’s forehead and cheeks. Dirt, maybe. One or two scratches on the side of his neck. His fingers are chaffed. “Are you hurt?” Tony’s hopeful that Steve had the honour of introducing his super-soldier fists to the assassin-wannabe.

“I’m fine.” Steve nods in the general direction of a large door. “It’s been five hours.”
“… Any news?”

“No.”

They sit like that, not speaking, not moving for the next God knows how long, as Agents – all donning STRIKE vests and totting MP5 – pace the corridor. One eventually approaches, and he does not wear a helmet. His gun is slung against his back, and with his freed-up hands, he cradles half a dozen of bottled water.

“Mr Stark,” his crowfeet crinkling as he offers Tony one. “Rumlow, Sir. Captain.” Steve picks a bottle for himself. “Forensics are still combing your apartment. SHIELD’s arranged a guest room for you at the Triskelion for the time being. And they’ve just released your shield. Do you want it now?”

“Is it here?”

“No, it’s still in the lab. I can bring it here if you want.”

“No. It’s uh, it’s too much trouble. I’ll get it from the lab before debriefing.”

Rumlow nods, and marches back to the forefront. A hundred questions sit on Tony's tongue and it’s torture unable to ask even one. He confirms this much: Steve did engage with Fury’s assailant. He pities that SOB. Coming to blows with a super-soldier probably wasn’t on the original menu.

Tony bites his tongue and asks, “Tell me about the shooter.”

“… He’s fast and strong. Had a metal arm.”

Hardcore.

“Ballistics?”

“Three slugs, no rifling. Completely untraceable.”
Then, all the way from the far end of the corridor, something rattles – metal on metal – and it’s heading towards them. They stand up, the cacophony impossible to ignore. A pair of nurses half-jog through the large door, stainless steel crash cart in tow. They spare them not even a chance of glance. Tony hates this bit about hospitals. So much action, yet sometimes, so futile. He slumps uselessly on the bench and continues his vigil.

Steve too palms his face, and retakes his seat next to Tony.

It’s not just them. The anxiety permeates. Rumlow sticks his head into their vicinity again. More Agents begin to crowd the space. The Reaper draws closer. It’s suffocating.

Tony nearly misses Steve's barely-there whisper. “Nick showed up at my place, all torn up. He said, don’t trust anyone.” He almost freaks out when Steve’s forehead come to rest on his shoulder. “Eyes and ears everywhere.” Steve’s so close Tony catches a faint whiff of copper and sweat. “SHIELD's compromised. They’ll want to bring me in for questioning after this. Can I kiss you?”

Tony turns sideway so his lips brush against Steve’s. That’s enough permission. He swears Rumlow just poked his head in again and accidentally witnessed his Commander locking lips with another man. The burn in his skull is real. He trusts Rumlow not to Instagram this, but what a sight it must be.

Steve deepens his kiss as his hand sneaks under Tony’s jacket and worms its way around his waist. His back. Something stirs in his pants. It grows awkwardly tight down there despite the bleached sterility of the hospital. This is as highly inappropriate as it is longed, and he can’t help groaning into Steve’s mouth when that daredevil of a hand gropes his behind.

The tent in his pants is begging for friction.

Steve pulls away, God, the tip of his tongue just barely caressing the plump edge of Tony's lip. And air – life-giving air – inflates his lungs. His own face is steaming, and Steve runs a thumb carefully along his cheekbone. “Find out what’s on the drive.”

Drive?

He scoots a safe distance away from Steve until it seems platonic enough to the public. The crunch under his butt tells him that Steve’s snuck something else inside his pocket during the heat of things.
How clandestine.

“Stay safe, Tony,” Steve reminds him with a hint of urgency. “Take your suit with you everywhere you go.”
Chapter 12

Every time Steve Rogers reminds him to take his suit with him is bad luck. Every time. Call it premonition, or foresight. It always comes to blows. Another villain, another purpose. Tony shudders to think what’s in store for them this time. He wants to tell Steve that his concern is better spent on himself, that he should watch his own hide when the door before them swings open again, and a solemn-looking surgeon emerges from it. They both rise to their feet, and multiple more come dashing. Half a dozen STRIKE members hem in the battered-looking trauma surgeon to the wall, anticipating, hopeful. She pulls her surgical mask off, and looks at each of them carefully in the eye. She says nothing. It’s the worst kind of verdict. In that moment she sizes them up, Tony studies the speck of blood on her scrubs and footwear.

“No,” Rumlow deadpans from somewhere behind Tony.

“I’m sorry.” A needless affirmation. “Does the Colonel have any next of kin we can contact?”

This job… every sunrise is a lottery of life. Or death, maybe Fury’s the glass-half-empty type. Nobody mourns with tears though he can only imagine just how much that one-eyed nightmare mean to them. Rumlow and another tough-looking guy with a scar running vertically down his cheek are soon fiddling with their phones, probably looking for the right number to call. The missus’? He never stopped and wondered if Fury was ever married.

This job… is rife with death the putridity doesn’t faze him. Doesn’t faze Steve. Doesn’t mean it gets easier with time. He excuses himself – Steve’s gaze follows him – and takes the right turn. He leans against the wall, and smiles glumly at a trainee nurse minding her station.

There may be a body to bury. But, there still is a world to protect. It isn’t yet over for the living.

Steve soon emerges from the corner, and their eyes meet.

“You mention a debriefing?” Tony holds out his tablet for Steve to take. In the generous span of five hours, JARVIS has uploaded whatever he can get his digital fingers on the Mandarin. More will come, but this will have to do for the moment. He’s counting on the government’s competency for the gory details.

“The Mandarin?” Steve frowns. “I heard the name on the radio.”
“I don’t have much going on, but that’s only because I’m toeing the line. I’m sorry about Nick, and I understand that you’re upset. Angry.” Steve opens his mouth, ready to rebut but Tony quickly talks over him, “I’m saying, you and your men will want to hunt down that metal-armed hitman, sure, but this deserves your attention, too.”

Steve nods once, and grips the tablet tighter. “Thank you.”

“Cap?” Rumlow approaches. Sounds like the discussion with the surgeon has concluded. “They want you back at SHIELD.”

“Yeah, give me a second.”

“They want you now.”

Their director is dead. Everyone’s ticked. “OK.”

“STRIKE team,” Tony hears Rumlow’s communicator buzz, “Escort Captain Rogers back to SHIELD immediately for questioning.”

Questioning? That sounds criminal-ish.

Tony’s own puzzled look is met with Steve’s dry smirk. Bastard, he knows what’s coming.

“Be safe, Tony,” Steve says again under his breath, as Rumlow closes his gloved hand over Steve’s shoulder.

And he watches Steve be led away by his men. He lingers, but they don’t bother him. They were more cordial with him than before, humouring his questions and accusations with a faint, understanding smile. Nodding at all the right points as he futilely argues for Steve’s exoneration. “We’re not arresting him, we just want to have a word with Captain Rogers.”

He doesn’t like the way Steve is escorted into a truck flanked by six burly men. Looks to him like the proverbial finger is already pointed somewhere.
They offer to host him at the Triskelion, or somewhere in DC should he want to wait for Steve. He declines. They offer to drive him home. Again, he declines. Not one to give up so easily, they then offer to chaperone him back to New York. He tells them to bugger off. Politely. There’s an unsettling chill in his spine, their nicety like poison. He tells them he’s leaving, and they let him.

He hops into his car and heads to this warehouse Stark Industries has in DC. There are still people working at the front despite the late hours, forklifts manning the crates. He gives the workers two short honks, winds down the window to stick his hand out and waves, and promptly parks his car behind the block.

He has to get out of here.

He unlocks his trunk and activates his bracelet. In a seamless demonstration, Mark 42 wraps around his body, and under the guise of night, he sets his flight course to Malibu. As the suit climbs in altitude, out of a hunch he does a perimeter sweep on the warehouse. His suspicion isn’t misplaced. JARVIS reports two black SUVs parked outside of the premise. Thermographic camera confirms the presence of four men. Probably STRIKE. Armed.

He’s sorry that he has to leave Steve in DC to hold down the fort, but he’s needed in Malibu. Guarded by the watchful eyes of three dozen Iron Man armours, all combat ready when he says so are the most dangerous of his possessions – his private servers. He’s thrashing them. Grinding every plastic piece to dust, embed them in cement and launch them into space. SHIELD wants a piece of his tech for Insight?

Over his dead body.
Chapter 13

He enters his house like every normal, late-thirties man does – through the roof of his garage-cum-workshop, and lands on the dais reserved for Mark 42. Dum-E wheels over to greet him like a normal puppy would the soonest he ejects himself from the suit. It holds out a wad of unread letters – why do people still snail mail him stuff? – so he pats the bot gently on its servo.

“Welcome home, Sir,” JARVIS intones from the ceiling, and the lights come on, illuminating the front portion of the workshop where all his computers are set up. One, two, three bullet points on his to-do, but first thing’s first.

“Whatever that’s on Steve’s tablet, I want them on the wall.”

He wants to know where the Mandarin was last seen at. He wants to know how many are loyal to his mission, his weaponry of choice, what he had for breakfast yesterday. The row of spotlights dim as the projector turns on. He squints at lines and lines of information before they’re properly formed, hunting for keywords, and nada. What JARVIS does have is non-worrying stuff like there actually has been nine bombings instead of three that were made public knowledge. No bomb casings, so, dead ends.

“I don’t want to… stereotype, or appear prejudiced,” he rubs at a tender spot in his forehead, “but the simplest explanation is often the best one. Is this Chinese propaganda?”

“… No evidence is pointing in that direction so far, Sir.”

“OK. Right. Think we should help ourselves to the Army’s confidential files?”

“No, Sir.”

“Nope.” He sinks deeper into his swivel chair and props his legs on the table. “Has Steve accessed the Mandarin folders on the tablet?”

“… No, Sir.”
Why hasn’t Steve opened the case with SHIELD? The debriefing should’ve been over – it has been three hours since he bailed.

“Update us both on the Mandarin when something new crops up.”

“… Yes, Sir.”

One down, two to go. The next item on his list?

“I also need you to hook all the suits onto the servers, and backup everything into the suits’ memory. We’re repurposing House Party Protocol into flash drives.” That’s right. That’s genius right there, turning all Iron Man suits into offline storages capable of self-protection and termination of hostile targets with extreme prejudice. And they are many – forty of them, so good luck to SHIELD catching them all as they fly scattered all over the globe. As for the sitting ducks that are the twelve-cabinets-full of database master servers lining the eastern wall, they’ll be ash by the end of the day.

“Sir, it will take approximately three hours for full synchronisation.”

“Initiate.”

The whirring of his suits and servers are like symphony to his ears. Three hours is cutting it close – SHIELD is bound to realise something is amiss. Anytime now a STRIKE team might just come busting through the front door.

Three hours is also plenty enough for him to decode what turns out to be a pen drive that Steve has snuck into his pocket. It’s nondescript, having muted metallic sheen without engravings or sticky labels to at least clue him in on what to expect when he plugs it into a computer. He checks his suits again, makes sure they’re all still downloading whatever JARVIS is feeding them.

He plugs Steve’s drive into the CPU.

“Ho… kay, what?”

The command prompt loads up fine. It’s the syntax that he doesn’t get. Never seen before, in fact.
Either it’s superbly advanced at the time of writing – time stamp says it was last accessed just two weeks ago – or deserves a special pedestal in the local museum. This won’t work. If he can’t read it, he can’t crack it. He can teach himself the language. There are patterns. Nuances that might be trickier to understand. But, not something that can be achieved in three hours.

Not game over, either.

“Plan B. Where were you last accessed from?”

“Sir –”

A dull hum of nothing interrupts JARVIS, and the lights at the far distance go out without ceremony. It’s easy enough for his eyes to adjust to the darkness, but no matter, the backup generator should kick in any moment now.

“JARVIS?”

Nothing. The garage remains dark.

“Shit –”

He dashes to Mark 30 and checks the connection – dead. Wireless transfer just got terminated, and the scowls on each Iron Man face appear more pronounced in the shadows. Is it an electric trip?

“JARVIS?” Tony tries again, dropping his voice to a careful whisper. Crap, crap, crap –

Screw wireless transfer. He has cables long enough to loop around Earth at her largest diameter twice. Scrambling back and forth between the servers and the armours’ platforms, he connects each one manually, and as he works feverishly, he thinks he hears another set of footsteps echoing from the floor above, matching his own pacing.

The lack of light is screwing up his mind. Focus! He has Mark 42 bracelet clutching his wrist. He’s heeding Steve’s advice like a good soldier. He’s protected.
It works swimmingly – all forty suits are back online, but he doesn’t allow himself a millisecond of celebration. The spare generator is obviously kaput, and this is a really sucky time for a total blackout. Thank God for the arc reactor in his chest lighting up his way. He clasps his sweaty hand over his heart and crouches. He might as well hold up a giant, flamingo pink neon sign in the shape of an arrow that says, “Shoot here!”

A door is being closed upstairs. And another.

His mind isn’t playing games.

There is someone in his house.

Plan C, and there’s no debate about this. Ensure that power supply remains up, and that unfortunately means – his fingers clench over his ribs – hooking this bottomless battery that is the arc reactor to the generator, until downloading is completed for all forty suits. Decoding Steve’s pen drive will have to wait – he plucks it from the USB port and slips it back into his pocket.

Whoever it is up there, they chose the wrong freaking day to mess with him.

Tony exhales long and deep, and makes for the darkened stairs.
Chapter 14

What was he thinking, designating the storeroom next to his bedroom as the generator chamber. Should’ve parked the damn thing in the garage, or the basement like any sane people would, sane people with some sense of self-preservation. What if it goes off? What if, like right now, he needs to access it quickly, but not without tracking across the foyer, the sitting room, a mini-library, another sitting room, and four flights of steps –

He clears half the foyer without event. He ducks low behind an oaken display shelf, and checks the main entrance behind him. No signs of overt break-ins – no broken windows, doors still attached to their hinges. Things are still where he last left them. The blackout in the garage is more extensive than anticipated. Clearly it affects a significant area of the mansion – he can’t see clearly past the archway that connects this foyer to the sitting room. But, there’s still light streaming in from the gardens. Small mercies. He strains his ears for signs of the intruder, and counts to five.

Nothing.

He takes huge strides – as quietly as he can manage – and enters the archway. He flattens himself against the wall, hiding in the shadows of yet another oaken shelf. He’s sweating and panting and stumbling around in his own house blind – dammit. It occurs to him Iron Man is still allowed to call 911 for help. He has his cell phone with him.

Ego be damned.

He pulls his phone out, and slides to the floor –

A drawer slams shut from the kitchen. Heavy footsteps begin to prowl the floors, and Tony swallows thickly. His heart flutters in his throat. It’s as if the intruder has no more regards for inconspicuousness. In the stark stillness, every step echoes. A distinct mark of threat, and challenge. *Come and get me, Stark.*

One pair of legs. One set of footsteps. *One person.* Currently throwing tantrum in the kitchen, which is all the way out back from where he is.

Tony scrabbles to his feet and dashes past the library and spills into the second sitting room. This one has more furniture occupying the negative spaces, plenty of cover – he dives behind the couch and stills his palpitating heart.
In the nick of time.

Something just enters in the library. Sounds heavy, tinged metallic. Another footstep.

He has company.

Tony clasps a palm over his nose and mouth, forcing himself to hold everything in, every blink, every inhale and exhale. Shapeless shadows glides on the floorboard and they offer no useable information – spindly and elongated when the light shines from one way, and bloated when from another. Tony takes his chance – he turns his head slowly to the right, easy, that’s it – and the bottom of his stomach plunges.

Male, tall, built. Steely eyes staring right back at him. Dark hair, unkempt that runs to his shoulder. Strong and fast –

A silver arm swings down on him with intention to kill.

“Fuck –”

Barely able to roll out of harm’s way, Tony lands ungracefully against the TV set with a thud, the back of his couch crumpling with the force of that punch. What is this guy?

“Stay back!”

Face frozen without expressions, the intruder strides over, and would’ve closed the distance –

Something whizzes past – all sixteen pieces, to be exact – and wallops into the back of his skulls. Blood splatters across the wall – on Tony – he shudders at the warmth and stickiness. Despite the lethal forces, the man gets up, and without sparing Tony another glance, has his attention turned to the disassembled Mark 42.

Tony doesn’t think even Steve can stand up to an Iron Man suit, and Steve has the super-soldier serum coursing his veins. Metal arms are cool, but for his sake, Tony hopes he’s made of metal
elsewhere, too, because he’s not slipping kids glove over Mark 42’s repulsor-charged gauntlets.

Rolling once more to his side, he bounds up the stairs and bursts into the generator room, leaving the chaos that is decimating his mansion behind him.

Even here, it’s dark – he’s scared.

He is. God.

He throws his body weight fully against the door, not trusting his legs to keep him up any longer. He slides the bolt in place, double locks it, and for good measure, piles a ladder and a rather heavy worktable across the door. His bracelet is still blinking furiously in green. That’s good, that means he still has a chance of safeguarding the generators.

He kneels beside the port where the arc reactor is supposed to go. There’s no spare reactor lying around of course – maybe one or two cassettes of palladium but point is, he doesn’t stockpile on arc reactors. He blames his paranoia of evil people taking advantage of his tech. Paranoia that has just been proven true. This is it, the only one left in existence, and he’s hooking it to the generator.

With surprisingly steady hands, he lifts his shirt and bites at the hem, keeping his chest exposed and the light from the reactor comes forth unhindered.

“I’m so gonna regret this.”

He releases the catch and pulls the reactor out of the casing, taking care to keep the electromagnet attached. This is fine, the reactor is just a battery, as long as he doesn’t pull it out like a freaking trout, his heart is going to be just fine.

His bracelet flashes orange. Not so good.

Deftly he plugs his reactor to a white cable and finally, finally breathes a sigh of relief when the air-conditioning and lights come back on. There’s probably fifteen minutes left for all thirty suits to complete downloading every byte of Stark Tech.
Something heavy is being dragged up the stairs. His bracelet is dead. Not blinking. Since when?

The gap under the door slowly darkens.

Fifteen minutes, *fucking please*.

And the door knob jingles.
Tony groans sharply from where he’s crouching. His knees give out and he lands on his butt, crushing his pen drive and cell phone under his weight. The door knob jingles some more, each tug more violent than the last.

It stops.

He checks the timer on his phone. Twelve minutes.

“Come on, come on, come on.”

A heavy pound on the door sends it rattling in its frame. Once, twice! Wood dust snows onto the floor. The shadow moves again from under the door gap.

“For a guy who just demolished a Bugatti sofa like it was made of foam, a plywood door is toothpick. Tony scoots towards the wall as much as he could, taking care to not detach his chest from the generator. It’s incessant, and the ruckus a death rattle in his skull. Here he is, trapped like a mouse, chained. His life should be flashing before him, anytime now.”

“Come on, come on…”

Ten minutes more.

A metal fist breaks through the cracks. It retracts, and light from the hallway streams in through the gaping hole.

Then, a face. Impassive.

“Damn it – come on!”
Seven minutes.

He’s going to die.

His bracelet is dead. It’s cold and quiet, a useless hunk of stainless steel around his wrist. His chest feels tight against his palpitating heart, his arc reactor warmer than usual as the generator drains the power stored within. The hole in the door quickly expands as the man kicks and punches at it, sending debris flying into the room.

He’s coming in. He’s coming in –

He looks away, downward – a brief air of annoyance crossing his face. He’s suddenly kicking at something else, something near the door that Tony can’t quite see. There are wheels squeaking, what the hell, wheels – and chirps. Tony will recognise that high-pitched, pathetic whining anywhere.

The intruder calmly reaches to his right thigh, and unholsters his sidearm.

Not Dum-E. It’s just a baby –

Three shots. No more whirring.

Tony grapples hopelessly at the generator, begging it to work faster. He shrinks deeper into the alcove between the generator and a shelf, and stares at the man in terror as he stoops to push through the hole he’s made in the door. He straightens up, and coldly surveys his target. Tony is close to hyperventilating and pissing his pants, as the man raises his other hand. Only for Tony, he has another gun – larger, odder in shape – and he takes his aim, right at Tony’s heart.

It’ll be quick. Messy, but quick. He’s so sorry this is the end.

_Nants ingonyama bagithi baba!

Fuck the Lion King.
The man’s eyes snap to Tony’s phone, currently broadcasting the cheery jingle of Pepper’s favourite number. A small smirk creeps up the edge of Tony’s lips. *Time’s up.* That’s the alarm going off. He lets go of the generator he’s clinging to, and almost chokes with glee as his garage, two floors below is positively falling apart, it’s pandemonium. Glass shattering, walls crumbling. The very foundation of his mansion shakes with renewed vigour as all thirty Iron Man suits of armour undock, ready to flee.

He can’t help it. “I win.”

Not a muscle in the man’s face twitch as he pulls the trigger. The last on Tony’s mind is a sharp stab mere centimetres below his arc reactor, and he’s gone before he hits the floor.

Super-soldier serum aside, Steve is one lucky son of a gun to have survived a drop onto the tarmac from a twenty-storey height. He hasn’t broken any bones – a hairline fracture or two in his left ulna, maybe – as far as he can tell by wiggling every body part in under two seconds. Get up, get up, get up.

“He’s over there!”

They’re persistent, Steve gives them that. He’s trained with them, ate with them, worked with them. Persistent SOBs. Was mighty useful when they were still fighting on the same side.

Clenching his teeth, he pushes himself up, his shield firmly tucked around his left forearm. It still stinks of chemicals Forensics used to lift fingerprints of Fury’s assassin. They were hopeful. Steve after all was the only one so far who had engaged the metal-armed man in combat. Flung his shield at the back of his skull with non-lethal force, only for it to be caught in mid-air and returned with double the force.

That’s superhuman feat.

Forensics told him the shield was clean. Another dead end, then. No matter, he can worry about that later. Right now?
He runs like his life depended on it – which in all honesty, isn’t an exaggeration in the least – and he knows he’s sitting duck sprinting down the boulevard in a dark blue combat suit with a freaking glow-in-the-dark silver star emblazoned across his chest.

“Rogers, freeze!”

He raises his shield instinctively, and a quartet of STRIKE agents rain him with .22.

They should know this isn’t going to work.

He pays them no heed and runs forward, bullets following him like flies to fire, and for whatever reasons, the driver of an adjacent Toyota Corolla – balding, middle-aged man – suddenly climbs out of his seat, and raises both hands in the air. “The… the key is in the ignition, Sir.”

Christ.

“I’m so sorry about this,” Steve vaults over the hood and promptly drags the man to the tarmac with him. A few stray bullets ricochet off the car.

“Hold fire! The Captain has taken a hostage!”

Christ.

“I’m so sorry about this, Sir,” Steve apologises sincerely. Using the sidemirror to pinpoint STRIKE’s position, he quickly dashes sideway and flings his shield with such accuracy, all four are knocked out as it careens gracefully back.

“Mind if I borrow your car for a bit?”

The man nods, his lower jaw in his lap.

“Thank you.”
Steve hops on, and merge seamlessly into DC traffic. He’s starting to feel the full brunt of that lovely surprise Pierce arranged for him in the elevator as he was exiting the Triskelion. He got to know a cattle prod of some sort up close and personal. The small of his back is still sensationless. It was a no holds bar thrash party he’s glad he got out of by cannonballing out of the elevator cabin from the fifteenth floor.

He admits, there’s no head or tail to his story. One moment, he was scheduled to meet Alexander Pierce for a chat about Fury’s assassination, by the next he’s fleeing the state in a borrowed car.

Borrowed. He fully intends to return it.

He’ll need a change of clothes, too. The Cap suit is beautiful – he can’t thank Tony enough for this – but it has to go. He stops by some suburb minutes after crossing borders and changes into a cotton T, sweater and yoga pants that he pilfers from a clothesline.

Tony might say the blue in the sweater brings out the blue in his eyes.

Speaking of which, Tony’s the one viable… friend? Individual? Whom Steve still trusts isn’t hell bent on stowing him in prison. Already he’s looking forward to the extra-comfortable white Bugatti sofa in Tony’s Malibu mansion to soothe his battered body. Feels like lying on a marshmallow, gonna sink right to the floor.

And there’s a tonne of things to bring Tony up to speed with.
Some folks at a tech conference many, many years ago speculated if there’s such a thing as an afterlife, and if there is, how does it look like? Is heaven (or hell) a communal compound where all souls hang out together? So… like planet Earth? Boring. Or, do souls own their private cloud that manifests to their whims and fancies? Tony drained his champagne and seeped away because hypothetical situations are one thing, unsubstantiated beliefs are another, and he has no patience for the latter.

He’ll be damned, he thinks, as he bites back a moan while clarity phases in. Heaven or hell, this place hurts like a bitch. He’s upright, he wonders how, because he’s jelly all over. His vision is swimming, his balance is shot. Feels like 1999. That ridiculous fund-raising gala held on a cruise – it went on for six stormy nights and by the time they dropped anchor, he had already bawled all the tears a man could possibly hold in their ducts. It was that boring, and nauseating, and dammit, he’ll bite. This must be hell. His version of hell. Figures.

Something – someone? – looms before him. He’s still too dizzy to make out the form, but going by the way light is reflected off the person’s left bicep, images and sounds start trickling in. A deluge of information, too quick to process – his head lolls backward and thumps against a wire mesh. He tries to move his arms. Locked. His ankles, too.

His senses returned, and his surroundings snap into coherency.

“Oh, come on!”

He tugs violently against his bonds, but they won’t give. He’s effectively chained to his cot, upended to hold him in a standing position. This isn’t the afterlife either, this is his garage. His collection of supercars looks pristine on the other side, his computers are – to his horror – still turned on, running some programmes that he doesn’t recognise. He twists his neck to the far right – thank God – the rows of cradles meant to house an Iron Man each have all been vacated.

He has no idea where his suits are. Safe, as far as he’s concerned. JARVIS will look after them.

The man standing in front of him eyes him emotionlessly.

“Hi,” Tony begins, wincing as the crown of his skull pulses. “Don’t think we’ve met. What’s your name?”
The man’s eyes narrowed, and Tony’s throat bobs. Something tells him this is not the best time to be a hero.

“That metal arm. Its dexterity and strength is something I’ve never seen before, and I’m me. Is that prehensile prosthetics, interfacing with your own neuronal functions? Or very impressive body paint? Who made it? I’d love to offer them a job with my company. I can pull some strings.” The man reaches behind his waist and brandishes a butterfly knife. The blade zings when he flips it. “Or not.” Tony’s mouth begins to dry. “Don’t like small talks, huh? Fair enough. Let’s go straight to the elephant in the room. Why do you want Fury dead? Is it something personal? Which I can kind of relate. Or are you working for someone else?”

The cold steel of the blade rests meekly against his cheek. “The sedatives are wearing out,” the man rasps, and Tony blinks away unmanly moisture in the well of his eyes. “Do you know where you are?”

“… Is this a trick question?” The blade presses deeper into his flesh, and he hurriedly replies, “My house. We’re in,” he swallows again with more difficulty, there’s a growing lump in his throat, “my workshop. My garage.”

“Where are the Iron Man suits?”

“… What?” This is the most forward people have ever been with him about the suits.

“They were here.” The knife eases off somewhat. “But the cradles are empty now. Where are they?”

“I don’t know. Gone for a walk. Or a milk run?”

Next thing he knows, the front of his shirt is sliced apart, methodically until its useless scraps on the floor. His torso is bared, and the arc reactor shines brilliantly between them. If they can’t get to his suits, the arc reactor makes a great consolation prize. But that isn’t enough. The man makes quick work of his belt, undoes the button at his waistband and unzips him –

“Hey – hey!” Tony jerks again, twisting away from those hands. His pants and briefs pool around his ankles, and the man again carves them up into smaller pieces, leaving Tony stark naked in the middle of his workshop, strapped to his cot.
Cold metal arm grasps him by the waist, and though he can’t see it, he feels the blunt edge of the knife grazing the underside of his flaccid cock.

“You’re a sick puppy, you know that?”

“Where are your suits?”

“I don’t know.”

“Where is Captain Steve Rogers?”

That one is weird. He frowns, and wonders why a hitman this honed will bother with publicly known information. “With SHIELD. There’s a meeting.”

“Not anymore.”

“… What do you mean?”

“Your servers and storages are empty. Where is the backup?”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. What about Steve –”

Behind them, the wall of computer monitors suddenly turns blue – the blue screen of death – with the ASCI marquee spelling “ROSEBUD” cascading from unit to unit. Looks like the suicide code has been triggered, and Tony grins some more. That’s the final trick up his sleeve. Try overriding the deleting process in hope of salvaging residual data, and boom! Rock falls, everything dies.

The metal hand releases his waist, leaving a five-finger bruise in its wake – curls into a fist and slams into the square of his stomach.
Chapter 17

Tony’s bodily thrown into the mesh wire with the force, and he thinks he blacks out a second or two. Pain – hot and intensifying – radiates from his middle, and he slumps in his bonds once more. That almost does him in. He gasps and blinks unwept tears rapidly, his biology spasming with a flight or flight response. Flee. Get away. Spit and bile sputters from his lips. He’s broken something. Positive. Breathing hurts.

But he’s not dead yet. Because he’s still useful, somehow. It hurts to think.

“Let’s try again.” The man grabs a fistful of his hair, and forces his head up. Tony can barely hold his focus. “Where are your suits?”

He sees the mouth moving, forming words he still can’t hear.

“Where is Steve Rogers?” There’s an unscratchable itch in his diaphragm, but he dares not cough. The fingers against his scalp tug harder, and the man leans in. Tony endures that ghastly breath against his face.

“You’re unenhanced.”

An astute observation, Tony thinks darkly. He would’ve slow clapped if it weren’t for his hands chained above his head.

“They say this gives you powers.” Metal fingers trace the outline of the arc reactor.

“I’m human,” Tony wheezes out. This is the only time in his life that sentence ever makes sense in context, and needs to be said. “That’s a battery… to power my pacemaker.” Talking consumes too much air. He needs air he can’t get.

“If I take this?”

“… I die.” It’s like he doesn’t give two fucks anymore. What’s stopping the man from plucking the light out of his chest, with or without knowledge of the arc reactor anyways? “Nothing special…
about it.”

Then, the man steps right into Tony’s personal space – so close that Tony’s forehead lolls to rest against his shoulder – as he loosens the knots fastening Tony’s limbs to the cot. He collapses wholly into the man’s embrace, a stream of almost-screams muffled against the front of Kevlar vest.

He’s carried to someplace… some other corner of his garage… there are gaping holes in his ceiling dammit, his suits must’ve blasted their way out like that. He could too, if only there’s a suit he could get into. Escape. Reach out and fly away.

The man drops him onto a workbench and Tony instinctively wraps an arm around his stomach. He’s on his back, putting off pressure from his broken body. It doesn’t hurt as much like this. Compassion, hey. Maybe the man will even let him go.

The man looms in his view, and he waits until Tony calms himself enough to focus on the syringe – shit, a syringe? – in his robotic grasp. “This will fix you, Tony Stark.”

Just let him be, send an ambulance down his way and he’ll be right as rain. The medic will deal with this… this jet of blood he just projectile vomited when he coughs. The stabbing in his lungs won’t subside.

“No…”

He can only meekly tense his muscles where the syringe pierces the underside of his forearm. He might just break the needle.

“Maybe you’re one of the lucky 2.5%, Tony Stark.”

That’s not any of the good stuff. Not morphine. He feels the burn of the liquid coursing his vein. This isn’t how biologics usually work. It’s searing, almost painful, travelling upstream from wrist to shoulder.

“No –”
He doesn’t care if his face is tear-stricken, if his sobs are wet and wussy, if his ribs are breaking up as he twists and turns. It’s hot, so hot. Feels like every inch of his skin flaying as he’s stretched out on a furnace.

“Help… help…”

Fucking *steam* billows from his mouth.

“Pep… per.”

His vision swerves in and out. The fluorescent tubes are but a smudge of white, before they sharpen so acutely he sees the very screws bolting them to the ceiling itself. The black of sky is unending, and then, stars as clear as Christmas bobbles light up the Milky Way.

“Steve –”

Can’t hold on, can’t hold it in –

He doesn’t know what sort of sounds he’s making. There’s tremendous pressure in his chest, and his vocal cord is raw. He smells something charring and coppery around him, and there’s no stopping. His very flesh boils. The table creaks when his back arches, splinters burning immediately into coal.

“Please –”

This is it. He’s gonna die alone.

“Sir, stay calm.”

Can’t even cry without the tears evaporating. Too much, too much, too much –

“Sir!”
It’s done. His heart stutters. He feels arrhythmia kicking in.

“Sir!”

The wood under him erupts in flames, and he’s falling, falling –

“I have you, Sir. Breathe deeply.”

Red Snapper – Mark 35, he vaguely recalls – swoops in and in a neat display of brilliant engineering, opens to welcome him into its belly. He’s home, encased in a near-indestructible shell of titanium alloy, a prototype he builds with the functionality of a Leopard 2A7 – pretty kickass tank, he thinks – in mind.

“Anaesthesia administered. Oxygen is up by five percent,” JARVIS intones.

“You came… back?”

“For you, Sir.”

Tony still can’t cry. Everything turns to steam. He’s fading, he feels it. Summoning what strength his body still has left, he instructs JARVIS one last time, “Initiate… House Party Protocol. Take the mansion down.”

“Yes, Sir.”

His suits – most, all of them come back, glimmers of red and gold – the only spectacle that makes sense in his deteriorating sight – and lay waste to what’s left of his Malibu home. They’re programmed for utter annihilation, and will not stop until every unit of computer, every disc, every teaspoon is reduced to ash. He vaguely wonders if Fury’s killer is still in there somewhere, and if he would survive the wrath of a battalion of Iron Man suits.

“Thanks, J.”
It’s been an honour.

“Sir!”
Chapter 18

Steve Rogers is a wanted man.

He’s been driving southwest non-stop for five hours and finally takes the exit into Lee Highway to stop for gas and food. Despite being the hottest bachelor-cum-fugitive in town, he hasn’t been stopped even once on his journey. No roadblocks for him to bullshit his way out of. He knows SHIELD would stop at nothing to bring him in – probably not fussy about the dead-or-alive matter either. He parks his car near a park and keeps to himself, eyes toeing the cracks in the cement walkway. Where it gets brighter – more public areas, so more crowded – he raises his hoodie and continues to mind his own business. What must be the highlight of his evening is when he walks past a Sony showroom and a row of the latest Bravia screens. Each one is projecting his mugshot and a banner “Fugitive on the run” below it. He’s on nearly every national news channel, and Fox is loving this latest shenanigan. It’s a problem of course to be under such microscopic scrutiny, but for Steve, this is doubly worse.

Nobody knows he’s born in 1920, for starters. He can personally vouch for the modern society’s creativity at digging up information – researching – and their technology in this regard is a menace. Sooner or later, they’re going to know who he is. He won’t be surprised if the birth certificate of his scrawny Brooklyn ass makes headlines tomorrow morning.

And then.

“What the hell…”

Walking past Samsung gallery next, he stands rooted before a three-by-three floor-to-ceiling instalment of 64 inches UHD 4K Smart TV’s, currently projecting not his face, but of the Malibu mansion he has set his GPS to. He’s supposed to be heading there, to seek out Tony but this eight o’clock news is saying don’t bother.

The cliff itself is rubble and jagged sandstone, nothing else.

“Search and rescue has been going on for the last six hours –”

“Attempts to contact Mr Stark have been unsuccessful –”
“Homeowner Mr Anthony Stark, last seen in a Stark Industries’ DC warehouse, is reportedly missing.”

“CEO of Stark Industries and Mr Stark’s long-time personal assistant and confidante, Miss Potts is not available for comments.”

“The Iron Man suits are not among the debris dredged from adjacent seabed –”

What is going on?

It’s a long shot, but Steve calls Tony on his private number. Out of service. Figures. Pepper’s own is disconnected as well.

He tears away from the showcase and runs to his car. The mansion is… Tony has no personal attachment to it. But what’s underneath – his personal workshop, his collection of suits, his private servers and data storages – there’s no way Tony wouldn’t come forth for them.

Unless.

“Damn it, Tony.”

He almost pulls the driver’s door off its hinges. In the darkness though, the tablet Tony passes to him outside of Fury’s operation theatre shines so brightly on his dashboard it sears into his retinas.

“Captain Rogers.” It speaks. “Captain Rogers, do you receive?”

“Shit –”

It’s a talking tablet, of course it is, it’s Tony’s. Every hunk of metal is near-sentient with the guy. How does he interact with it?

“Captain, this devise is set to unlock by voice-activation.”
“OK,” he locks himself in the car and checks his surroundings swiftly. The park has fewer folks around. It is past dinner time after all. “How do I do that? What do I say?”

“… Welcome back, Captain Rogers.”

That’s it?

“JARVIS?”

“At your service.”

The imagery from the TV sets floods his senses. All comes at once, and he cradles the tablet in his lap. “JARVIS, where’s Tony? He’s still out there somewhere, is he?”

Please.

“… For Sir’s safety, I cannot divulge that information.”

“Fair enough. Is he in trouble?”

Emoting isn’t possible with android talk, but Steve senses hesitation. “Sir is in need of assistance.”

His heart somersaults. He sticks the key into ignition, and tucks the tablet in his waistband. “This is good, right? Can you still hear me?”

“Yes.”

“How about this? You don’t tell me where he is. Direct me. Left, right, cross three state borders? I’ll be there.” He merges with the traffic, and wraps his sweater more securely over the tablet. This is the only thing connecting him to Tony. He can’t lose this. “You contacted me in the first place, didn’t you? I can help. I want to help.”
“Lafayette, Virginia.”

Steve turns right. This should take him back to the highway. “Where I am.”

“It’s an eight-hour drive from your location, Captain.”

“As long as it takes, JARVIS. Lead on.”
Chapter 19

Tony loses all sense of time as he stirs awake for what must be the nth time. It’s familiar, flexing his fingers and toes and blinking rapidly to see, but he’s not-seeing, and hyperventilates, and falls into unconsciousness again –

This time, it’s for real. He’s alert, his senses linger on – which means, everywhere is perpetually hurting, and it’s intensifying – and he has no idea how to begin describing this… state of being. There is no up or down, early or late. Just, dark. Unending stretch of inky blackness, yet awfully claustrophobic.

The suit. He’s in a suit.

“JARVIS?” His voice is like fingernails on a blackboard. Weakly, he kicks out with his left leg, but his suit won’t give. It’s not interfaced with his body. So, it’s dead. Why is it dead? “J, please. You here? Let me out! God –”

Shouldn’t have shouted. Idiot. The echoes magnify the pounding in the back of his head. He’s numb for the most part, barely able to move – still, his mind wanders. What if he manages to free himself from this casket and realise his legs have been ripped off from his body trunk or something?

Morbid? Judging by the steel-hot lash in his side, not so far-fetched. Maybe the suit is the only thing holding pieces of him together.

In the event of failure of electronic components, there’s an ejection lever to the right of his right thigh which he can use to free himself manually. Only, his fingers can’t quite reach because they won’t freaking bend –

“Whoa –”

The suit springs free, and Tony gulps lungful of fresh air. He can almost taste the sweet fragrance of magnolia, and a tinge of wisteria. Foliage waves above him where he lies flat on the ground. He’s still partially encased in his suit, and he has no doubts it is lush grass under his feet when he steps out.

“Where am I? JARVIS?” His nose itches, and he tries to scratch it, when a sting by his wrist stops
him. One end of the cannula is smudged with something crusty and brownish – his own blood – and there’s residual liquid running inside the lumen.

Now only things start to make a lick of sense: the suit takes him in, goes on stealth mode and makes its way to one of the five designated “safehouses” around the country, because he’s paranoid like that. He has contingencies for his contingencies. On its way there, it probably drained its power supply doing all it could to keep him alive. This fluid – he plucks the needle from his vein – it keeps him alive. Drugs, nutrients, hydration, everything he needs to keep the body going. The suit’s arc reactor doesn’t look too hot either. It’s venting something blackish and appears dullish.

In that case, wherever he is, there’s a good chance he’s hopelessly stranded. And he has no idea where in pluperfect hell he is.

He takes the Iron Man helmet and crams it over his head. “Talk to me, J. Please.”

In the stillness, he collects himself, his wits and bravado, and thinks, he’s done this before. He made Mark I in a cave with a box of scraps, while strapped to a freaking car battery! He can do better. He can MacGyver the crap out of his bad luck.

Taking advantage of the lifting veil of night, Tony creeps past a pickup truck that’s parked in a secluded corner of the neighbourhood’s park – so this is where he has unknowingly crash-landed. The signboard hammered into the moist earth under a large bodock tree bears these words in black paint: Rose Hills, Tennessee.

He’s stranded. Definitely stranded.

He doubles back to the impressive crater where the suit impacted and drags the hunk of metal to the bodock tree again. A thick shrubbery surrounds it, and the grass about them have a nice, healthy glow of chlorophyll to them. Not much traffic, he deduces. He stows the courageous Mark 35 between branches and twigs and God, this is… he has hit the lowest point of his year.

All his suits are spread out around the world, his sole companion committed android death to save his hide, and Steve…

He steadies himself with a deep breath, and marches out of the park, the Iron Man helmet wedged safely under his arm.
He’s not unused to stuff of nightmare. The trick in not letting them take over his sanity is to handle them one at a time. It’s an uphill battle, what he calls “life”, basically… and this is baby play, yes? He climbs into the pickup truck and boy oh boy, jumper cables. Brand new! Prying the hood up with a crowbar he found next to the cables is no biggie either, so is clamping the terminals of the car batteries to the helmet.

Tony slides to the tarmac and rests against the rim of the front wheel. Charging up the helmet will take a while – half an hour, he guestimates – and with nothing else to do with his hands, he’s close to freaking out again. He glances up at the driver’s seat, checks if the coast is clear, and glances up again. Since he’s already “borrowing” the battery…

He tries the door – unlocked, it’s amazing his luck today, despite the circumstances – and leaps into the driver’s seat. This seemingly abandoned vehicle is treasure – the passenger seat is bundled up in faded T-shirts, sort of like a makeshift seat cover, so Tony helps himself to one.

He’s naked, remember? Yes, he just streaked across a neighbourhood park in his birthday suit to get into this truck. Not his proudest moments. And the least he thinks about it, the better. Too bad there’s no food in the glove box – which is disgusting, on second thought – or spare cash. There’s a radio, though, which is God-given. A working one, he dares to hope. He bets after all is said and done with his Malibu property, the paparazzi and every airwave, every government agency would go rabid about him – what becomes of the living legend, invincible, ruggedly handsome Anthony Edward Stark?

He will be missed.

“I should call Pepper.” He raps on the helmet’s forehead with a split knuckle, and detaches the cables.

One successful carjacking later, he’s well on his way downtown because… he’s hungry. He needs caffeine to go. A buttload of them. He casually turns on the radio fully expecting it to go gaga over his disappearance, and he hears, “Captain Steve Rogers was last seen holding a man hostage during an attempt to arrest him near the Triskelion Headquarters. Officially a fugitive, Captain Rogers is believed to be armed and the public is advised to not engage him on sight. Any relevant information should be communicated with urgency through this hotline…”
“Captain Rogers, Sir is on the move.”

Steve almost crashes into a tree. He rights his steering wheel, and winces when the driver overtaking his car salutes him with a middle finger. “Where is he going?”

“I’m not sure.”

Which is either a genius move – playing his cards tight to his chest is the safest thing to do given current circumstances – or Tony has lost his mind. “Is he safe?”

“Currently, yes.”

“How are you sure?”

“… His vitals are steady. There is no evidence indicating duress or out-of-norm behaviour.”

“This is Tony Stark we’re talking about…” Steve mutters, eyes tracking the signage around the corner. He’s only one-hour drive away from Tony’s last-known location, that is, until Tony has the bright idea of driving in the opposite direction. “Can’t you hack into the electronics of his car? This is a wild goose chase.”

“Sir is currently driving a 1952 Chevrolet pickup. There are no accessible computer circuits to access.”

How disappointing. Tony didn’t steal himself a Tesla at least?

“I’m thinking aloud here, JARVIS. Can we at least send him a message somehow? Tell him to stay put?”

“… Initiating voice calling with Mark 35. Please hold.”
“Voice calling? That is an option all along?” Steve almost breaks off the turn signal lever as he flicks it up. “Let’s open with that next time.” Not wanting to risk crashing into obstacles, he pulls over by the curb, and thank God for the foresight, because his heart stutters when the tablet vibrates with a voice that is unmistakably Tony’s.

“OK, J. Don’t go shiny on me now. There are people around and they’re glaring at us. And I look ridiculous wearing an Iron Man helmet while idling at the gas station, all right? I look like I want to mug the cash register. Which is rather tempting... don’t tell Steve I said that.”

Steve laughs, and draws a deep breath. He almost wants to cry. “Tony?”

“Not funny. Is this pre-recorded?”

“No, it’s really me. I – you have no idea how good it is to hear from you again.”

“... Steve? Steve Rogers?”

“It’s me!”

“... Christ.”

“If I may offer my unsolicited opinion,” JARVIS interrupts. Steve holds his tablet up and sees a map coming onto his screen. “I suggest rendezvousing here.” A marker blinks at the centre, which happens to be about fifteen minutes’ drive away from where he’s parked. It’s a quiet suburb. Somewhat upscale. People tend to go about their own business low-key.

“That’s only an hour drive.” Tony sounds amused. “Aren’t you in DC?”

“... I was. Eight hours ago. We need to catch up.”

“Feels like we woke up the wrong side of the bed and fell through a wormhole. Into an alternate universe or something. Congratulations, by the way. You’re officially a criminal.”
Steve smiles wryly. “So, you heard?”

“It’s the only thing I’m hearing on the radio. Nobody’s talking about my alleged disappearance. And houses-on-cliffs don’t disappear overnight. Apparently, that’s not as interesting as some SHIELD Agent going rogue.”

“… It almost feels like a diversion.”

There’s a beat on Tony’s side, before he says, “I have some theories, too. We should compare notes. I’ll see you, Steve. Stay out of trouble.”

The next hour is possibly the longest he has endured since the Ice Age. He scouts out the locale. Plenty of open spaces. No tall buildings, so no snipers. No blind spots. He can see cars coming from the distance, far enough to buy him time for hightailing. There are semblances of a neighbourhood towards the north, likely an abandoned construction. Only one way in, and his keen eyes are on it. It’s also the only way out. Aerial attacks and scouts are possible, but the skies stretch endlessly where he is.

Nothing escapes him.

A grimy pickup truck eventually emerges from the horizon, and he patiently waits for it to rumble to a halt. The driver kills the engines. A door opens and gravels crunch under his bare foot. That’s dangerous, isn’t it – this is a construction area, there are nails everywhere. Tony Stark, dishevelled and worn shuffles towards him – stop walking, a misstep means tetanus –

Steve’s arms wrap around his form, his scruffy chin digging into the crook of Tony’s neck. “Thank God.”

“Yeah.”

Tony feels so warm.

“I’m so sorry for what happened to you.” He’s careful with his embrace. It’s a cardboard world out there. “I should’ve been there. This shouldn’t have to happen.”
“Says the man wanted dead or alive. I could turn you in. Use the reward money to rebuild my house.”

“... That would be funnier yesterday.” And thunder claps above them. They just can’t catch a break, can they? Steve draws away, and thumbs at the bag under Tony’s eye. “You’re burning up.”

“A fever, maybe? I feel fine.”

“I have supplies. Are you hungry?” He doesn’t have to, but he holds Tony up by the arm as he steers them towards his car. “There’s water in the back.”

“Where did you get the money? My bank accounts have been frozen.”

“And you know that how?”

“This.” Tony pats the top of his helmet fondly. “Must be Pepper. Smart. Did you rob someone? That’s a lot of supply.”

A boxful of bread and bottled water is a lot of supply? That, coming from Tony Stark?

“Found them by the bin. They’re expired foodstuff.”

Tony rips open the packaging of a breadstick and stuffs it in his mouth. “Nonsense. This is delicious.”

From the tail of his eye, Steve observes Tony chow down scavenged food like it’s the best thing since cronut. He most likely hasn’t eaten in a day. Something twinges in Steve’s chest. There is just so much he wanted to say to Tony. So much to ask. He almost lost that chance. This job, every day may be their last. Doesn’t mean it doesn’t hurt when it happens.

It hasn’t, and already it’s plenty awful.
Tony drains half a water bottle in one go, and wipes his mouth brusquely with the back of his hand. “What’s missing is AC/DC blasting ‘Back in Black’ from the radio, close-ups on the tyre and rim as we blaze down the ‘Highway to Hell’. Perfect. Just you and me and a… uh, decapitated Iron Man. We got food, we got water to last us a week. Your shield.” He trails off for one full second and goes, “Pardon me.” Tony twists around to fetch it, where Steve has tucked between the backseat and his own.

“You haven’t washed your hands after you ate. Don’t leave sticky fingerprints on it!”

Tony hums absent-mindedly as he flips it over and over again, eyes roaming over every inch of the vibranium shell. He pulls at the leather strap, taps on the convex side of the shield, and finally runs his palm around the edge.

“What are you looking for?”

“A tracker. Just in case.”

“I checked. It’s clean.”

It doesn’t stop Tony from fiddling with it as Steve drives them to a row of semi-completed house-ish structures. Despite arriving earlier, Steve hasn’t been going around the neighbourhood shopping for the best unit to squat in. From here, this one seems good enough to take shelter from the elements. It’s also the closest to the road.

“I’ve got like, five emergency accounts under aliases around the country, in case I needed to go incognito. When things go belly up.”

Steve pulls up the handbrake and kills the engine. “Like right now?”

“Exactly like right now.”

“… Well? Are you actually waiting for me to drive you to the nearest ATM?”
“That will be nice. But,” Tony pushes the shield into Steve’s chest, “to access them, I need my documents, and my documents are in my safe houses. I don’t have a safe house in Tennessee. None of them are anywhere close to Tennessee. I was supposed to be on my way to one, but the suit drained its power trying to keep up life-support until I wake up. No, don’t – you can freak out later.” Tony puts a finger hurriedly across his own lips. “We’re still in the open. Let’s get inside.”

The night is cool and humid with the threat of a thunderstorm, and the scent of ozone is welcoming. Tony climbs out of his seat, and promptly sinks to the ground.

“Tony!”

The arm not clutching his helmet is wrapped around his stomach. “Yeah,” he wheezes, “I was wondering about that.”

They just can’t catch a break.

Night is closing in. It isn’t safe out here, and the wide openness is treacherous. Steve scoops Tony up and ventures into the shed, hoping that there’s at least one good corner that won’t suck worse than the general goings of the day.

He smells dried urine when he crosses the threshold.

At least the floor is dry, and there are no missing tiles from the roof. A far cry from the Ritz, but it’ll have to do. Steve lays Tony on a plastic tarp, and coaxes him to lean against the brick wall.

“There’s a fucking staple sticking out...”

They’re quickly losing light. Steve activates the flashlight option on his tablet and holds it up by Tony’s ear.

“Right, now I’m seeing dots when I blink. Spare me, Steve.”
“Where is it hurting?”

“It doesn’t anymore. Comes and go.”

“Show me, or I’ll help myself.”

Sighing dramatically, Tony puts his helmet down and lifts the hem of his oversized shirt. The bluish glow of his arc reactor casts shadows around them. “I’m the best-looking floor lamp this side of America.”

And Tony’s right. He’s flawless. There’s nothing wrong with him.

There’s nothing wrong with this body.

“What?” Tony’s grin fades somewhat. “You look like you’d seen a ghost.”

“… Did you, by any chance, went for plastic surgery, or…” Steve reaches out to run his hand over Tony’s torso. “Procedures? To remove your scars?”

“Huh?”

“They’re gone, Tony.” He brings the tablet closer to Tony’s stomach. “The scars around the arc reactor. They’re gone. You said you were on your suit’s life support. You don’t have even have a bruise.”

“… It worked. The injection.”

“God, Tony. What injection now? What did you take?” Tony’s the harbinger of ill news. It’s almost always either about the end of the world, or his life.

“Nothing much I could do when a killer machine popped by my house, almost took my lungs out, stripped me naked and strapped me to a table and loaded me chockful of this gunk.” Tony yanks his shirt in place, and cradles his helmet in his lap again. “I thought that was it, Steve. All I cared about
was uploading my tech into my suits, and dispersed them around the planet for good. So, when the
time comes, you’ll get to them, to my work. You’ll know what to do.”

Steve hears all that. One sentence speaks louder than the rest. “You were dying?” Again?

“He said, there’s a ninety-seven percent chance of this failing. The odds are stacked against me. I
was a goner. I accepted that.” For good measure, he jabs a finger into Steve’s chest. “And don’t baby
me. My life, my decision.”

“… I’m not going to.”

“Good.”

“Who attacked you?”

“Same guy who killed Nick. Metal arm. Like you said, fast, strong. I swear I broke a few ribs. I feel
fantastic, all things considered. Is this how living like a super-soldier is? I can get used to this.”

Steve huffs, and looks down at Tony’s feet, blackened with dirt, but mysteriously woundless. “You
don’t want that. Believe me.”

“Not having headaches and cold for the rest of my life? I can get behind that, believe me.”

Tony doesn’t understand what a self-healing body does. It robs so much more than it gives.

“Anyway, I saw his face. If you can get him on a police line-up, I can pick him out.”

“Chances are, you and I are more likely to have our own separate line-ups than this guy.”

“Tell you what. You’re the DaVinci, the Van Gogh. Do us a facial composite. Get the news out to
the FBI, maybe. They’ll want to nail the bastard that did Nick in, won’t they?”
A chink in the enemies’ armour, finally. Only… “I don’t have my art supplies.”

“Seriously.” Tony nudges Steve by his ankle. “Look at me,” and promptly gives him the largest eyeroll he can manage without permanently having the whites of his eyes stuck on his face. “What do you think this tablet is? The most sophisticated multitouch technology in the world, and you just put it on the floor that smells of burnt faeces.”

“We’ll do that first thing in the morning. Now, you need to rest.”

“I said, don’t baby me.”

“I’m not.” Between wrestling Tony to the tarp and forcing him to sleep, and launching into another exhausting debate about personal care – or lack of – Steve sets himself a new task. “I’ll tell you what. I’ll make us a fire. It’s going to be freezing out here. You rest up.”

“Why did you go Jason Bourne on SHIELD?”

Steve dusts his bottom, and turns to the door. “I’ll tell you after I make that fire. If you’re still awake.”
Not surprisingly, Tony is still wearing a shit-eating grin by the time Steve gets a smokeless campfire going. There’s plenty of desiccated detritus to set alight, and he hoards what he could find before rain falls, piling them in a neat mountain beside Tony’s tarp.

“Go to sleep, Tony.”

“I want to hear a bedtime story.”

The gold of the fire reflected in Tony’s eyes highlights the hard lines in his face. He trembles, subtly, in a way that coincides with his clawing at the helmet he’s taken to hugging like a kid would his teddy bear.

Steve takes the relatively clean spot next to Tony and huddles against the wall. “SHIELD detained all Lemurian Star’s pirates on their premise. Their leader, Georges Batroc said he was contacted by anonymously e-mail and paid by wire transfer. The money was run through seventeen fictitious accounts, the last one going to a holding company registered to one Jacob Veech.”

“Who told you all that?”

“Alexander Pierce. Secretary of –”

“– World Security Council. I know the name. Don’t know him personally.” Tony winces again, and Steve pretends the spider web up the ceiling is rather interesting. “Go on. What about this Veech guy?”

“Veech died six years ago.”

“… And then, he got better.”

“No, he’s dead, for real. His last address was fourteen thirty-five Elmhurst Drive. Nick’s mother lived two doors down.”
“I don’t like what Pierce is implying.”

“SHIELD thinks the hijacking was a cover for the acquisition and sale of classified intelligence. The sale went sour, and that led to Nick’s death.”

“It’s not Nick.”

“I think we all agreed on that.”

“No,” Tony shakes his head, “Bionic Man was in my house because he wanted Stark Tech. Blueprints, schematics, freaking doodles. I think he even went through my thrash. Point is,” he kneads his temple with the heel of his palm, “Someone is poaching technology and information – very likely for weaponizing Insight. SHIELD pins everything on Nick, and sic's Bionic Man on him to close the loop. Pierce stinks something funny. I looked up Insight’s database. They require Nick and Pierce’s biometrics for authorisations. Nick’s out. Who’s in charge now?”

“We have to stop them.”

“And that is why you’re sitting around toasting marshmallows with me in Tennessee, Steve.”

Steve suspects just as much. The world may not have woken up to the news of war hero Captain America’s return, but SHIELD has. SHIELD dregs him from the frozen seas, and breathes air into his breasts. They haven’t seen the wrath of Steve Rogers, but there are tales from the Wars. He’s the largest threat standing between Project Insight, and world’s peace.

Yet, defeated is how Tony sounds like, and that, Steve can’t get behind. Him on the run is exactly what SHIELD needs to cover up the assassin’s hit on Tony’s mansion. No way nobody isn’t the least curious about a legion of Iron Man razing Stark Industries’ owner and CTO’s home perched on a Malibu cliff – because that’s very low profile, happens all the time. That also means, even the media is marching to SHIELD’s fife.

A most dangerous adversary.

So what if they’re right where SHIELD wants them to be – cornered, without allies and resources?
He’s not giving up.

Tony coughs suddenly, his cheeks flushed with heat. His collar is damp with sweat, and Steve hears the friction of air passing through his airways. “So hot,” he whines, and reaches into their cardboard box of supplies for another bottle of water.

Tony’s arm scorches when Steve holds him. A literal furnace, and Tony is only human. “I’m not exaggerating, but you’re boiling hot.”

“’Bout right. Feels like that.”

“… Lie down. Get some sleep, Tony.”

Like he said, this isn’t the Ritz. Still, Tony dozes off the soonest his head touches the makeshift pillows of stacked-up rugs.

_____________________

Tony is awake before he’s asleep… if that makes sense? He props himself up on an elbow, careful not to make a squeak as he rearranges his limbs on the tarp. It’s pouring outside, an endless shower the size of the oceans. Steve’s fire is still alive, and it warms the coldest of hearts. Steve himself is still where Tony leaves him – on the floor, arms crossed over his front, eyes shut. It’s difficult to tell with soldiers. Constantly drifting between slumber and not.

But, God… it’s hell, it’s fire and brimstone and he’s melting again, like before, right after the injection –

“Fuck –”

Tony grabs his helmet and rushes clumsily to the front door. He sits on red earth – dog shit, whatever, he doesn’t care – and curls up against the wall. It’s much cooler here, thank the rain, and sucks air like a vacuum cleaner. His insides are torched. He needs ice in him – on him. He’s afraid he might combust. Morbid hallucinations… not helping! Imagine that, his own bodily fluids boiling and evaporating – how is he still alive…
And, God.

The tips of his fingers are glowing bright orange. His skin has gone translucent.

And he sees steam again. He’s crying – he doesn’t realise it, doesn’t feel it because the tears *billow* as they spill.

What is wrong with him?

He does the one thing he can. He jams the Iron Man helmet over his head, and searches for Pepper’s number. He leaves the bright green button untouched. He only wants to see her face. Her straight, long strawberry blond hair that *never* gets tangled, even by the end of the craziest days. He remembers her patented, quiet smile, the one that exudes understanding and encouragement, and means anything but.

“Pepper, it’s me,” he whispers. He doesn’t want to wake Steve up. “I’ve got a lot of apologies to make, and not a lot of time. I’m so sorry I put you in harm’s way.” She’s strong, she’s smart, and hell hath no fury like Pepper scorned. The *world* would’ve – must’ve – come down on her without mercy. She’s their only connection to the missing Tony Stark. “That was selfish and stupid and it won’t happen again. And I’m sorry in advance because… I can’t come home yet. There’s something I need to do. You got to stay safe. That’s all I know.” He’s sobbing. His own lips taste too salty.

And something’s burning.

Tony jumps to his feet, and pulls the helmet off. The place where his butt was two seconds ago is *smouldering*. Little stack of hay that’s now reduced to cinders. Tony grabs a broken stick from a pile of garbage and scatters the remnants before they grow into a proper fire – when the stick too lights up where his fingers have closed around.

“Tony!”

“Don’t touch me –”

Steve swats the burning stick from Tony’s grasp, and kicks the haystack into the rain. Blood drips onto the floorboard where a nail in the stick tore through the flesh of Tony’s palm. “It’s OK, let’s get that cleaned up. We can stitch it up, I know… how…”
But the wound itself is *knitting to a close*. Tony watches the scab falls off – completely healed – like the gash never happened before. He looks at Steve, and slowly turns to the window pane where he catches his own reflection.

Both eye sockets are alight with flames.

“Steve,” Tony pleads, steam accompanying his every syllable. “Am I going to die?”

There are worse ways to go than in a burst of fireworks. Sparks shooting from his ears, maybe. The end of times.

“I don’t know, Tony.”
“It’s five-thirty,” Steve whispers as he combs Tony’s hair briefly with his fingers. It took a while for Tony to fall asleep, even after he commandeered Steve’s left thigh for his pillow. “You up?” Steve hand had rested atop the arc reactor for some glorious three hours the night before. Sometimes, he tapped a steady one, two, one, two on the flat side of Tony’s stomach. He remembered a parade from his time, and the marching beat that his God-awful drill commander used to scream at them as they huffed and puffed under the scorching midday sun.

It’s the crack of dawn, and the sun splits the sky.

“We can hang around a bit more if you want to.”

Tony blinks his sleepiness away, his chin tilting up to have a better look at Steve. “Did you sleep at all?”

“Not really.”

“… Your turn.” He makes to get up while Steve holds the tarp they’re sitting on still with his toes.

“I’m not tired. Magic serum.”

“Yeah, sorry, I’d completely forgotten about that. This stuff inside me though,” Tony groans, his knuckles kneading his temples ferociously. “It’s not curing this stupid headache.”

“It healed your hand.”

“This is some really specific healing powers. So, if I lob my leg off, will I grow a new one?”

“Only one way to find out.”

“Hilarious.”
There was a volley of information to process that kept Steve preoccupied in his vigil. He replayed Tony’s hypotheses in the back of his mind, gave SHIELD the benefit of the doubt. What Tony said was still the best fit, unfortunately only backed up by circumstantial evidences. The man with a metal arm is real enough. He’s the only breadcrumb leading towards the masked organisation behind Insight. And, concerning Pierce. With Fury out of the way, Pierce is effectively the one calling the shots. Pierce is Insight. Or is he also a pawn in this insidious game?

“Well.” Tony pours water into his gaping mouth, and passes the bottle to Steve. “Good morning. Anyway, what’s the plan? We can head north, drive another half a day, maybe more to a safe house. JARVIS can lead us the way.”

“Where’s Nick’s pen drive?” Nick trusted him with it, with his dying breaths. There must be something incriminating in it that puts a crosshair on his head. “What’s in it?”

Tony flinches at the mention of the pen drive. “About that…”

“You lost it.”

“It was in my pocket. He took my clothes. Tore them to shreds.”

Gone, then. They’re back to their only lead, this Bionic Man –

“But, I can get us into Insight. Before he attacked, I was going through SHIELD’s databases and cracking the drive. I’ll be honest, the drive itself wasn’t very interesting. The syntax was foreign to me – which is quite a blow to my ego. But numbers, numbers I could still read. It was last accessed two weeks ago –”

“The drive was a backup from the computers on Lemurian Star.”

Tony left brow floats. “Say what?”

“Nick said the drive comes from the Lemurian Star.”
“… Tell me this is the same drive some random Agent downloaded on a hidden mission you complained about. That drive.”

“It’s that drive.”

Tony snaps his fingers, and grabs his helmet. “If she could break into the ship’s mainframe, then I certainly can, too. She proved that the stuff wasn’t guarded by biometrics.” He puts on the helmet, and says, “JARVIS, the Lemurian Star. Is it online? Let’s go, go, go.”

Convinced and relieved that Tony is no longer worrying about spontaneous human combustion, fatigue slams into him like a logging truck. He hasn’t rested since his escape from the Triskelion. That was almost forty-eight hours ago. Adrenaline has been soaring high, and now he’s crashing. His vision swims and he closes his eyes to the morning light, his skull thudding gently against the wall as he leans back.

“Steve, you’re done.” Tony grips him about his shoulder. “Rest.”

“Can’t,” he lies. “You’re still working on it?”

“JARVIS is. I’m sipping on a virtual Pina Colada in here.”

“I can do that facial composite now.” Steve pulls the tablet towards him. “Describe him.”

“Workaholic.”

A testimony to the perfection that is Stark Tech, the drawing app on the tablet is impeccable. There’s virtually no lagging between the touch of his finger pad on the glossy screen and the creation of a dot. Sketching is intuitive.

“I think he looks like that guy from ‘Black Swan’. You watched that movie yet? OK, no. I can hear your forehead wrinkling from here. Six feet-ish. Blue eyes, like yours actually. Dark brown hair, wavy, shoulder-length.” Steve hears a deep sigh, and Tony muttering under his breath under the helmet. Jargon. Streams of words, or syllables that don’t make sense to Steve. “Parse it through what I said. OK. Hair, right? Crap.”
The scowl on the helmet seems to have transplanted over to Tony’s face. “Sorry. I can’t work like this. It’s too clunky to shout instructions at JARVIS. I need a computer. I need to interface with the Matrix.”

“Can’t you use the tablet?”

“The processors aren’t built for wrecking firewalls. You know what? Give me that. I remember he looks like this intern we had over the summer five or six years ago. Andrew Ilnyckyj… see if I can stalk his Facebook, or LinkedIn – he’s at Buzzfeed now?”

Steve peeps at Andrew Ilnyckyj’s mugshot.

The shape of the eye, the curve of his nose… the resemblance is uncanny.

“Let me touch it up a bit. Fuller lips, a tilt to the eyes…” And Tony flips the tablet so it faces Steve. He swears his insides turn to ice.

“Bionic Man.”

Eighty years ago – he was thirteen – one autumn morning, he was down this Brooklyn alley doing the usual foxtrot with the neighbourhood bullies. He had a shoulder dislocated and an eye swollen so bad he couldn’t see out of it, but it was worth it. They were mugging Old Lady Smith who lived at the corner of 14th – he couldn’t walk away. Before he got his stuffing punched out, this tall boy suddenly swooped in and kicked everybody’s asses into Sunday. Steve thanked him, shook his hands, and they traded names.

“I know him.”

“Nonsense.” Tony turns the tablet around to look at it again. Steve doesn’t need it anyway. He recognises it anywhere. “You know him? I know everybody you hang out with, Steve.”

“His name was James Buchanan Barnes. He served the 107th Infantry Regiment of the New York Army National Guard, before I selected him for the Howling Commando.”
Tony’s goofy grin withers. “He was part of the Howling Commando?”

“He was my childhood friend. He died in the War.”

“Steve –”

“That’s not him.” Ilnyckyj from Buzzfeed donning a metal arm is more plausible than this. “It’s not.”
“OK, Steve.” Gently, Tony pries the tablet locked in his grip. “It’s a common face. The workshop was dark. *I was dying.* My mistake. Steve?”

“… Yeah.”

Tony’s mistaken. The dead doesn’t roam the Earth.

Then Tony very successfully takes his mind off Bucky with his far-fetched plan about hijacking a TV van and its antenna. Something about needing the extra firepower. Why specifically a TV van – because that vehicle is so commonplace – instead of say, borrowing a computer on display in the mall Steve will never find out, because Tony rambles on, going into specifics. Tony’s droning soon loses its magic. Bucky’s face is still front and centre on the tablet, and Steve is cradling it.

“Breakfast on the go, then?”

He doesn’t always get sentimental, but being on the run, living in shambles kind of jogs back memories.

“Steve?”

“… What?”

“I said ‘breakfast’. Hungry?”

“No.”

“This one’s without sesame seeds.”

Bucky used to be the only one who remembers it. The little trivia lives on in Howard’s son, who would’ve known.
Tony offers to drive this time, and JARVIS finds them an unfortunate TV van parked outside a community hall hosting – according to the glitzy banner hung outside – the county’s biannual beauty pageant.

“Tony, there are cameras around.” He almost wants to grab Tony by his collar and hauls him back into the car. “We might accidentally appear on TV!”

“Put your hoodie up. Act chill. Stop panicking!”

The difference between stupidity and genius, is that even genius has its limits. Steve skulks about half a step behind Tony, and keeps his eyes glued to Tony’s heels as they meander the grounds. The community hall’s parking lot has been transformed into a makeshift, mobile TV station of sort. He can already imagine sixteen ways things could’ve gotten out of hand without even trying.

“We’ll be fine,” Tony reiterates, and pats Steve reassuringly on his chest. “They’re not looking for us together.”

They chance upon a truck parked under a large tree, and an appreciable distance away from the main hoo-hah. Tony must’ve liked it a lot, because he’s already cupping his face to the window, peering into the backspace.

“No one’s here.” The floor of the truck sinks a little as they both clamber into it. The workstation on their left is turned on, so it might not be as abandoned as Tony thinks it is. “It’s gonna be quick. I hope. If everything we need is still on the Lemurian Star.”

Steve is unsettled by every pixel on the monitor Tony is watching, every key on the keyboard Tony is tapping. This is too high risk. They have security on-guard northeast and traffic is a constant. Just because Tony is oblivious to the chatter and pitter patter of a small army by the hall’s main entrance doesn’t mean they’re safe.

Gravels crunch as someone approaches.

“Close the door,” Tony bids him, fingers still doing a mad tango on his keyboard. “Lock it!”
“Mom…”

“Shit…” Steve’s fingers grapple uselessly at the handle when the door is flung opened, a pasty, plump man in his mid-thirties blocking the way.

“Something magical is happening.” Man says it with his mouth slightly agape, eyes locking with Steve’s, his expression stricken, and slowly his eyeballs careen to the workstation where Tony is at. Steve really, really wants to crumple that phone into the next Dada and hell, drives the truck away. A hijacking done right. The man stows that phone into his pocket, and grips his hair by his ears real tightly. “Tony Stark is in my van!”

That does it. Steve grabs him by the front of his shirt, hauls him in and slams him against the door to close it.

“Keep it down, or –”

“Oh my God, you’re Steve Rogers – I mean, you’re like on CNBC, right now. Wow.”

“Son, you either keep it down, or I’ll have to chokehold you until we’re done borrowing your truck. What will it be?”

He quickly wriggles his index finger, and Steve releases him with a loving shove. Just to be clear. Tony swivels his chair around and points at him, “You. Is this your van?”

He nods furiously.

“Is anyone gonna come in?”

He shakes his head with equal enthusiasm.

“Great. What’s your name?”

“Gary.” It sounds weaker than he intended. He clears he throat. “Gary, Sir.”
“OK. We’re in a hurry, so I’m gonna cut right to the chase. I’m trying to grab a little something from some hard-crypt data files. I don’t have enough juice. I need you to jump on the roof,” Tony points upward, “Recalibrate the ISDNs, pump it up by about forty percent. OK?”

And Gary looks like he’s about to have a stroke. “Yeah, OK. Got it.”

“Be quiet about it!”

“OK. Wow.”

The truck rocks as he goes about whatever Tony just sets him to do. All things considered, for a normal guy, he’s handling this moment extremely well. It’s not every day one finds a presumed-dead Iron Man sitting in his truck, colluding with a wanted-dead-or-alive fugitive and still has the presence of mind to fix some hardware.

“Is this a good idea?” Steve asks hesitantly, as Tony watches the buffering panel on the monitor.

“Why not? I need it done. Better him on the roof than one of us.”

Two smacks on the roof later, Tony is again slaving away on his computer – so something must’ve worked. The truck shakes again as Gary descends. All right, he’ll bite. His main concern is Gary tattling on them, but would he really after doing Tony a favour?

Retaking his place in the crampy truck beside Steve, Gary coughs a little. “Are you guys like, together?”
Tony obviously heard the question, betrayed by the slight upward curve on his lips. He helpfully ignores it, and leaves Steve the honour of responding to Gary’s tactful query. Shall he answer that with that promised chokehold after all?

“No.”

“Oh. I mean, figures right? Did you like, kidnap Mr Stark and bomb his house – I mean, the news don’t say it, but I’m just, theorising. So, you’re holding him hostage or something? Is that why you guys are… uh, maybe hacking into Stark Industries or something? For money?”

It’s the sanest thing he’s heard this morning. It probably shows on his face because Tony gives up his pretence, *chuckles* before pushing a button emphatically on the right-hand side of the keyboard. “He’s harmless, Gary. And, you do understand that you can’t tell anybody about meeting us today?”

“No, Sir, I understand. I uh,” Gary glances nervously at Steve, evermore an imposing character in the tiny truck. “One word out of my trap and Captain Rogers will personally see to it that it was the last thing I ever said.”

“… You have a wild imagination. I’m not under duress, and he’s certainly not holding a gun to my head from his pocket or anything. No, seriously. Steve, come here.”

Upon which Gary immediately propels to the opposite corner, and gestures to Steve the path that he just cleared. Steve plods over, wanting nothing more than to end this charade and get their asses back in the car so they could be on their merry way to the Triskelion.

Then, Tony paws him about his shoulder, pulling him in –

“Wait –”

And slams his mouth over Steve’s, quelling streams of protests and polite cusses with tongues. Somewhere in front of them, they hear mutterings of “Jesus Christ” and furniture being jostled. Maybe Gary just passes out. Tony’s hand sneaks up the curve of Steve’s buttocks to grope him thoroughly through the yoga pants.
“Nice one,” Tony compliments as he nibbles along the shell of Steve’s ear. Curious fingers slip past the waistband, and Steve forcefully holds his pants up. That, or risks mooning the poor soul.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m tracking the signal. I need…” Tony’s eyes flicker to the screen, “Three more minutes. Kiss me.”

Tony’s lips burn. The crazy pyro show at dawn earlier still is vivid in Steve’s mind, and Tony chases them with insistent pecks on his upper lip. Each follow up more hesitant than before when Steve adamantly stoops frozen over Tony.

“Steve,” so softly Tony pleads, “please.”

His own lips purse over Tony’s for the first, third, fifth time – his hand rises to cup Tony’s jaws as he responds with mild interest. This pay-per-view has no rhyme or reason – count on Tony for bullshit-on-the-go – but what a show indeed they’re putting up for Gary. The hotter his cheeks burn, the harder his cock gets between his thighs. His tongue slips into Tony’s open mouth, shocking even him – good, serves him right – and Steve presses on. He steadies himself, bracing the armrests on Tony’s office chair.

“You’re a dick, Tony,” he groans lightly when the wet tip of his cock smears gunk over the front of his pants.

“It’s just mouth.”

“It’s been a while, spare me.”

Another squeak from Gary’s corner puts an almighty frown on Tony’s face, and he spins the chair away from his audience of one, clearing his throat as he goes. This is as good as it gets, then, Steve surmises, deliberately not looking at his bulge and willing himself to think of boiled cabbage and mouldy bread instead.

“Oh… shit. How did I miss that?” Tony starts jabbing buttons at seemingly random orders, and one by one the wall of monitors before him are turned off.
“What’s wrong?”

“Trackers. We have incoming.”

And right on cue, they hear shouting from the compound outside. The words are somewhat garbled, but they’re uttered angrily, impatiently. Someone’s determined to get what they want, and they don’t care about playing nice.

Gary swallows thickly. “I’ll go have a look.”

He slams the door behind him, and it clicks twice.

“Fuck —” Tony leaps off his chair, and lunges for the door. He tries the knob, which doesn’t give, and rams his shoulder headlong into the panel. “Let us out!” Steve is seconds away from busting them out of the truck with a hearty kick – trust him, it will give – when a suspiciously familiar voice says right on the other side, “Have you seen Captain Rogers on the compound?”

Steve pulls Tony away from the truck, and draws the curtains. They’re frilly and sissy as heck, but he’s appreciating them now.

“We have intel that he’s last sighted in this area.”

“No, Sir,” Gary replies. “Never seen him.”

“Is this your truck?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“We need to check it.”

“No, wait – you can’t enter!”
The door knob jangles, and Tony seizes Steve by the elbow, effectively forcing him to half-lean against the worktable. The edge digs painfully into the back of his thigh, as with his patience. He’s only an arm’s reach from Tony’s neck, so God help him.

“Public displays of affection make people very uncomfortable.”

His pants magically pool around his ankles.

“Jesus Christ, Tony – what the hell –”

Someone is trying the door again, and the entire truck wobbles with their effort.

“Agents, get the locks.”

“Tony, get off me –”

He’s stuck between the computers and Tony blowing him in earnest. The teasing from before hasn’t yet subsided. The knot in his core tightens despite Gary’s whining on the outside, and what must be a fleet of Agents trying their best to get inside.

“Tony –”

“Moan.”

“Stop, please!”

“Moan. Trust me, Steve!”

A bullet ricochet off metal bits. In the last vestiges of clarity, Steve pulls his hoodie up and arches his back, digging his cock all the way into the fiery depth of Tony’s throat. He needs to go – doesn’t care if Tony’s gagging on his dick, he asked for it – Steve fucks his mouth in earnest. Tony splutters,
drool running down his chin and Steve feels his throat seizing up.

Sunlight floods the interior.

Steve bucks a last time, emptying his load into Tony’s mouth, his frame contorting with the brunt of it.

“Fucking hell!” The door slams so hard in their face it bounces and doesn’t close fully. “Definitely not Rogers. Let’s go!” Steve didn’t even get to see a face. No matter. Their hurried footsteps away from the truck suffices.

Descending from his adrenaline high, Tony slumps onto the floor, chest heaving, mouth swollen and ruddy. Steve truly worked him over, and Tony being Tony, musters just enough strength to flip Steve the bird.
Chapter 26

Back in the claustrophobia of Steve’s stolen car, they survive fifteen minutes of intense silence before Steve cracks. “Shouldn’t have done that, Tony.”

“Done what?” Plastic packages rustle from the backseat, and one more loaf of bread disappears down Tony’s throat. “Jacking the TV van, or the blowjob? Be honest, they’re both highlights of your day.”

“No, they’re not. Is that the fourth you’re eating?”

“Dunno.” His voice muffling between chews. “Lost count. We still have loads. You hardly eat, Steve.”

“Not hungry.”

“Do we need to ration our food?”

Steve sighs, and checks the dissipating hill of bread packages and water bottle in the cardboard box from the rear-view mirror. He does eat for the record, but just enough to sustain his enhanced physiology. The serum has made it so efficient that despite his four-times higher BMR, his intake of expired bread is still about half of Tony’s. Human biology isn’t anywhere near his scope of expertise, but something tells him whatever it is in Tony’s blood, it’s behaving like an inferior version of the super-soldier serum. “No. Eat as much as you need.” Except, Steve has never gone up in flames, and he doesn’t want Tony to try just to prove a point.

“Great. It’s my turbo-charged metabolism, I think. I’m hungry all the time.” Tony turns his free hand around, clenching and unclenching his fist. “At least I’m not on fire.”

“You’ll be fine. We’ll figure out how to neutralise the toxin. Whatever it is.”

To that, Tony crams the last bite of bread into his mouth, and says nothing.

They were fortunate that SHIELD hasn’t thought of wiping out Insight from the Lemurian Star. A
cyber trail that obvious means either SHIELD isn’t yet aware that their little conspiracy has been downloaded and accessed by Fury, or –

“It’s too easy, Tony. It’s a trap.”

Tony takes two seconds to roll his eyes and discards plastic packaging under his seat. “Of course it’s a trap.”

“And walking right into it is your plan?”

“You have a better one?”

While the syntax is still gibberish to Tony, two details stand out – the time stamp has been updated to “last accessed three days ago”, and a coordinate from where it was accessed. It’s a fourteen-hour drive from Tennessee to Wheaton, New Jersey, a pilgrimage they must undertake. But, the actual journey will realistically take much longer. By lunchtime, they’re running low on gas and potable water, and twice, Steve blinked too long that cars appeared out of nowhere by the time he opened his eyes.

Tony does not comment, but asks to exit the highway and do a pitstop at a gas station. They find one quickly around a junction.

The array of CCTVs lining the paying booth makes Steve nervous.

“I don’t know if you noticed,” Tony chirps airily as Steve manoeuvres the car into a parallel park, “your beard makes for a good disguise.”

Pardon him for forgetting the shaving foam and razors before he hopped onto the car and drove somewhere ten hours from DC on the fly. “I get that we need the gas. But, I don’t have the cash, and we’re not stealing.”

“Hey, I’m all for a clear conscience. I’m not going to steal, I’m going to see what favours or odd jobs I can do for that… lovely shopkeeper over there.” Said shopkeeper has a look of a butcher and a scowl that rivals Iron Man’s. Not one for judging a book by its cover, Steve smiles tightly. “Earn some spare cash, at least enough to reload on gas, food and water. And aspirin. You look like you can use some.”
“… Aspirins don’t work on me.”

“It’s rhetorical. I won’t be far. I promise to stay on the premise. You sleep in the meantime, OK? I’m keeping the helmet next to your shield. Don’t drool on it!”

The gap of Tony’s absence is an abyss, never-ending. His presence has been a constant, one Steve has grown accustomed to. The passenger seat grows cold without his heat, and Steve watches Tony walk towards the shed where the keeper is seated, minding his teller machine. He wants to help, too. But, Tony’s right. He’s done. His body weighs a tonne and his eyes won’t stay peeled.

He leaves his window open a fraction, and sleep finally claims him.
Give a man a fish, feed him for a day. Fortunately, Tony is well-learned in the art of dual-wielding fishing rods, so.

There are jobs for him, all right. Mr Tough Guy alias sole operator of this majestic gas station while isn’t all sunshine and cupcakes, is still willing to compensate him for upgrading three used cars in the garage out back. Three 1967 Chevy Impala, two as black as coffee, the other luscious red he wants to charge right at it. No fancy requests – some engine tuning, something Tony is secretly rooting for because no way he’ll douche these babies up with say, a new boombox unit in the trunk or over-the-top hydraulic functions. Engine tuning is fine. It’s right up his morale alley, and by that he means greener technology for improved performance.

Who cares if these are meant for drag racing? God bless whoever is getting their hands on his handiwork, for the Angel of Everything Mechanics is smiling down on them.

Mr Tough Guy promises him a carton of instant noodles, more bread – just lovely – water and cereal drinks, plus a full tank of gas. No cash, too bad, but Tony hopes to charm his way into the cash register sitting on the table right there. They don’t need much, some change perhaps for emergencies. There’s only so many coins one can find in the nook and cranny of a stolen car.

Not bragging, but transforming these cars into badass mofos is the least of his concern. Dialling up the power output, torque and engine’s responsiveness is his game plan. That sums up to replacing the crankshaft with a greater throw, exchanging the carburettors with something larger… only Mr Tough Guy doesn’t have one of those lying around, so, cross that. He did find a heatshield from the shed… waste not, want not. So, he sticks that around the exhaust manifold. Lowering the engine intake temperature increases power. Not the most elegant solution, but he’s not vying for a Best Innovation Prize 2017, is he?

Because Mr Tough Guy’s middle name isn’t Chatty, Tony has the radio turned on the whole time he works for company. Sounds like the entire country is tuning into the terror that is the Mandarin, and the witch hunt for Steve. Not a peep about Tony Stark, or Stark Industries, or Iron Man. It’s somewhat insulting. Here he is, thinking he’s left an indelible mark in the hearts of the good people of the great US of A.

One car and a half later, a break is in order. He updates Mr Tough Guy his progress, and is given three hot pockets and beer for his trouble. A meal from the heavens! He cradles them in both arms and jogs back to where Steve is parked, feeling extremely pleased with himself. They haven’t had anything warm in two days, only dried bread. The texture and lack of flavour wears thin on his taste buds.
Something doesn’t feel right with Steve’s car. He sees undulating shadows in the driver’s seat. The car itself is swaying.

Tony pummels on Steve’s window that’s been half wound down. “Steve! Open up!”

No one else is in the car. Just Steve, thrashing in his sleep. And he won’t wake.

“Steve! It’s me, come on! Wake up!”

He swears to God, he will splash chilled beer all over Steve’s face through the window’s opening if it comes down to that.

“Please!”

Steve’s eyes – grey and haunted – shoot open and he gasps like his lungs stopped working, jolting upright from his fully reclined seat. Tony keeps banging on the door, and tries the handle in his desperation to get in there. He won’t stop calling for Steve, until Steve fucking acknowledges he’s here.

“Steve, open the door!” He’s here, dammit, he’s right here. “Let me in. Steve!”

Steve heeds his call, but he doesn’t see Tony. In the glaze of his brilliant blue eyes, there is the War, sprays of bullet and artilleries, an endless fire.

“Steve, it’s me. It’s me! Look at me!” He can’t get to Steve. The door remains resolutely locked. He knows how the haunting is like. Sometimes, it’s one night too many. “You’re safe. I have food, they’re warm! There’s beer. You don’t get drunk, but these are all free! Lucky, huh?” He’ll wrangle Steve back from the precipice. He’ll break through the glass if he has to. Rip his throat out screaming. He will. “I was listening to the radio whole morning. You’re still America’s Most Wanted Bachelor. I’m jealous. I’m not even in the footnote. And the Mandarin announced two more strikes. It’s a dangerous place, Steve. We need you. I need you, OK? Open the door!”

And Steve spills out of the car, his entire weight crashing into Tony’s middle. He’s almost thrown off his feet, but he grabs Steve around his shoulders and back, grounding them both.
Just one of those moments. It’ll pass.

“… Sorry,” Steve mumbles against Tony’s stomach. “Didn’t mean to.”

“It’s fine. I got you.”

The tablet Steve usually keeps on his person, tucked inside his sweater has slipped onto the tarmac. The motion sensor must’ve been triggered, the screen now alight. The time and today’s date is on display, as is the modified mugshot of Andrew Ilnyckyj.

The face of one James Barnes, or so Steve said.

“I got you, Steve.”
Chapter 28

Tony fixed two out of three cars by three o’clock. The challenge isn’t performing under pressure, but add Steve into the mix… he’s shredding through his supply of screws because memories of Steve gurgling in his sleep won’t go away. He tosses his spanner into the toolbox, frustrated and anxious, and walks to Mr Tough Guy, fully prepared to leave with nothing but a black eye.

In the end, Mr Tough Guy withholds cereal drinks, and provides them with only plain water. Out of sympathy – Tony plays up his look of distraught, eighty five percent of it was all him anyway – and he gets away with a carton of instant ramen and bread. *Fresh.*

He eyes the array of candies by the cashier forlornly, knowing full well he can’t afford them, and bids Mr Tough Guy adios. And then, he walks past the aisle stocked up with freeze-dried coffee powder. Bags and bags of them.

He’ll sell his soul for some of that.

Steve has already taken the passenger seat by the time he returns to the car. One good glance at his grocery bags and Steve frowns. “No water? We’re down to our last two bottles.”

“But, we have this.”

Steve doesn’t look impressed at all when Tony dangles Nescafe in his face. “Return that, and get us water! How are we making coffee when we don’t have water in the first place?”

“I’ll figure something out.”

“… Unbelievable.”

That is the last time Steve ever lets Tony do grocery shopping on their collective behalf. They’re still a good ten hours of continuous drive from New Jersey, so that means a pit stop somewhere off the roads to catch up on sleep. Tony checks Steve next to him, still snoozing. Thirty-six hours on the wake is tough on the body, with super-soldier serum or not. He can be a dear and wake Steve up regardless. Force him to switch.
Of course Tony wants to play hero this time. Man the wheel for as long as he can, get them to their destination single-handedly. Let Steve sleep to his heart content. He promises, the first thing Steve sees when he wakes up will be NJ’s famous local delight, the “Taylor Ham” Pork Roll. Is that what Happy calls it?

… Inevitably, happy thoughts beget trouble.

He pulls over and sits very still, ignoring the way his seatbelt is cutting into his chest. Steve is still fast asleep, which is beyond fantastic – so he slips his hand under his oversized T-shirt and clutches the arc reactor.

He can’t have imagined it, can it? A sweltering heat from the inside? But, the blue luminescence of the device is as glorious as ever. The electromagnet is still functioning.

“… Tony?”

He quickly adjusts his shirt and goes into the drive gear.

“Why are we stopping?”

“I uh, took a leak. Fertilised that tree right there, see?” Again, his heart skips a beat and his mouth dries up. Early onset of arrhythmia what-not, please, not now.

Steve’s makes for his shoulder, but he suddenly retracts. “Out of the car. Now.”

Great idea. Something’s sizzling, Tony’s nose doesn’t play tricks on him.

They’re lucky. They’re on a lesser used two-lane country road, not more than a couple of vehicles had driven past them the last five minutes they loiter next to the car. Tony’s steadily burning up, he thinks his eyebrows are singeing. He’ll soon turn into a freak-show so God help him.

“Calm down, Tony. Panicking isn’t going to help.”
“You calm down,” he pants. “I can’t control this!”

“We need to get off the road.”

“Where, huh? We’re in the middle of nowhere!”

“Exactly.”

Tony follows Steve’s line of sight and sees a dirt track leading into the bushes. The path seems unending, the foliage too thick to see through them. Anything can lie beyond this.

“Really?”

“You walk. I’ll drive the car in. Take the helmet with you.”

That’s the grand plan? Letting loose a flammable genius billionaire into the wilderness. There are dried twigs everywhere, he’ll be the reason this side of America record the largest bush fire on the planet.

Tossing Steve the keys, he asks, “Where do we meet up?”

“I’ll find you. Go.”

So, he walks. He walks although Steve hasn’t started the car despite hogging the driver’s seat for a while now. Still can’t hear the engine revving by the time Tony takes the left turn and loses sight of the road.

Steve will find him.

He walks until he can’t, stopping to catch his breath. This will have to do. He’s looking at a small clearing, bathed in only nature’s symphony. They can camp in the car here. Maybe stargaze a little at night. All the time he flies locked up in the suit, going at five-hundred knots – never once had he slowed down to smell the roses. He might’ve flown through aurora borealis, he won’t know.
His heart is still rolling on coal.

“Just you and me, JARVIS.” He hugs the Iron Man helmet closer to his chest as he sits on a large root. A taste of charred meat lingers in the back of his throat. “I miss Dum-E.”

Birds’ chirpings are soon drowned by the approaching crunch of rubber tyres on dirt, and the front of Steve’s car roars into the vicinity. Tony stands up and dusts his pants, and pretends it doesn’t irk him when Steve gives him a badly disguised once over.

“Feeling better?”

“I haven’t set anything on fire. Ask around.”

“We take a break. When the sun sets, we drive as fast as we can. No more breaks after this. I need you sharp.”

That sounds like crap just hit the fan, and they better hurry their asses over to New Jersey. “What happened?”

“It’s on the news. SHIELD went public with Insight two hours ago, and promised to use it to neutralise the Mandarin faction. Call it a demonstration of SHIELD’s might and them auditioning for the world’s police force.”
“Oh. Sounds like genocide is back on the menu.”

It’s less than four hours to sunset. That’s exactly how long they have to get a fire going again so they could dine on ramen and coffee. Steve passes their last two bottles of water to Tony, and then the pristine bag of Nescafe, and lastly the stink eye.

“It’s fine, Steve. Wanna see some magic?”

Tony peels the foil back and pours powdered flavouring over dried noodles.

“You mean, watch you ruin two cups of instant noodle?” Steve huffs indignantly and stands up. “I’ll look for wood.”

“No, no, sit down – look!” Steam rises from the cup he’s cradling gingerly in both hands. His face crumples with concentration and a thin sheen of sweat glistens over his brows. “It works, wow! I didn’t think it would. Are you seeing this?”

“Yeah.” Steve, too studies his cooked dinner with interest. “You just boiled water with your hands.”

“Yeah! Amazing. And it’s against the law of energy conservation. I’m officially a freak of nature.”

“… Get the coffee going after.”

No fire, no smoke. No giveaway to their position, only the rich aroma of kimchi baiting a couple of inquisitive squirrels into the clearing. “The artificial crap they have in this cup will kill you,” Tony waggles a finger when said squirrel waves its bushy tail at him. “Eat healthy. Go nuts on nuts.”

“You got your issue under control, then?” Steve, ever the stoic soldier. He drains the soup and folds back the foil over his cup. “No more turning into the human torch?”

“Let me see. Flame on!”
A candle flame wavers over the tip of Tony’s thumb. Its brilliance dances in his irises, and he bursts into laughter. “Oh my God, Steve! I’m like one of those things in your old comic books!”

“… How does it work?”

“I don’t know.” Tony is still chuckling. “I’m thinking it. I can will it. Boiling water takes more effort, but this is like breathing. Watch this!” Now, every finger of his right hand sports the same little flame.

“Stop that.”

“What? Why? Isn’t this interesting?”

“We don’t know what it is. We don’t know if using this… this power harms your body, if it has side-effects we don’t know about. I want to play safe. We don’t have time for unnecessary risks.”

“… Whatever you say.” Tony only concedes because of that volume of unspoken fear splashed across Steve’s face. They don’t know what’s wrong with him yet. What gives him the power to control fire, to heal. And this isn’t the time to conduct impromptu physicals. A trio of killer machines are about to be launched. Millions of lives as collaterals.

Tony drains his own cup of ramen and beckons for Steve’s empty one. “You think SHIELD is using the Mandarin as a test run for Insight?”

“No reason why they’ve been playing up the terror. What’s the sense in seeding public unrest otherwise?”

“Do you think the Mandarin's emergence a coincidence, or they’re actually SHIELD’s?”

The possibility of SHIELD being the disease and the cure is beyond horrifying. They might be up against an enemy with no compunction for sociopathic approaches if that means getting the job done. An enemy who has no fear, who is not held back by standards – nigh unstoppable.
“I don’t want to be a spoilsport, Steve, but we’re just a couple of taxpayers going up against SHIELD.”

“Doesn’t mean we give up.”

“They got Nick.”

“He gave his life to protect us, Tony. That has to count for something.”

“… Sure. Anyway, I hope you like your coffee black because I don’t have creamer and sugar on me.” Again, he holds the ramen cup with both hands, and steam rises. These demonstrations can’t be flukes. He really has gained an honorary membership with the freak club. “Am I on the news already? It’s been two days since I thrashed my house with an army of Iron Man. If that doesn’t take the cake, I don’t know what will.”

“No. Nothing on Iron Man or you.”

“Is the manhunt for you still on?”

“My name was announced right after Insight.”

“Christ. It’s clever, though. I’ll give SHIELD that.” Tony is steadily heating up his second cup of coffee. “You see what they’re doing, don’t you? They’re trying to flush you out with Insight. Pressuring you to come stop them. They’ll start with the Mandarin. They won’t stop there.”

“Stopping Insight is the mission.”

“Great. What a relief knowing you haven’t changed your mind.”

“… If you have another plan, I’m all ears.”

“The current plan is what? Walk through Triskelion’s front door with guns blazing? Jump onto one of those Helicarriers and force them down to the ground? Kidnap Alexander Pierce and make him
pull the plug on Insight? We have no plan of action, Steve!”

“No,” Steve cuts in coolly. “Our plan is to get to New Jersey, find out what’s on that flash drive that got Nick killed, and use it expose the conspiracy within SHIELD. Not everything has to be solved with bullets, Tony.”

He feels the colours mounting in his cheeks, and nods. The bitterness of his coffee a second slap to his ego. Keep calm, stay focused on the mission. He’s playing into SHIELD’s hand, getting all riled up when Steve – whose own head is first on the chopping block – still strives to stay on the moral high ground.

The sky is turning darker already. They’ll soon be back on the road.

… His coffee cup smashes to the ground, and he’s suddenly keeling over.

God.

Oh, God, this –

“Tony!”

There’s a fire in his heart, he feels it. He tastes smoke and ash in his throat, and his chest heaves. He’s hacking out charred bits of flesh and blood. Steve pulls him up, his upper body in Steve’s lap. Somethings’ wrong, somebody help –

“Steve…” He chokes, air too precious a commodity. His lungs are boiling, and it… hurts. “Steve –”

Steve is screaming at him. Steve is scared. He looks so, so scared. Tony grapples for last of lights before he goes under.

What a terrible way to die.
In the starry night, their stolen car coasts along the country road. Every turn that Steve takes, he does so as gently as he can. The passenger seat is reclined all the way to the back, and on it Tony lies on his side, not stirring in the slightest. Occasionally Steve checks the makeshift blanket he’d arranged haphazardly over Tony’s body remains tucked under his shoulders. There’s no real need for the fuss really. Even when they run over a dead branch and the car trampolines, Tony never did respond.

Maybe the briefest moan of discomfort. But he never wakes.

They just crossed the state border into New Jersey. No roadblocks, no patrols on their trail. Steve is about to thrash this car and borrow another one to throw their pursuers off the scent… but the coast has been clear so far. Too clear that it’s unsettling.

It’s a trap, he’s certain. They’re cartwheeling down the red carpet to whatever lies ahead.

Tony, on the other hand will be fine. The jump scare was… that was something else, all right? The few people Steve knew who vomited chunks of flesh usually wound up dead immediately after. Tony’s vitals were going strong. All evidences pointed to the pink of health. Nothing was wrong save for the pool of biological damnation in his lap.

“Tony?”

When Steve’s on a straight stretch of road – like this one – he’ll turn to run a palm up and down the length of Tony’s arm, if only to reassure himself that the body beside him is still warm and alive.

“Tony? Can you hear me?”

Tony continues to sleep through the rest of the journey, and at one o’clock in the dead of the night, Steve pulls their car to a stop where the indicator on the tablet says so. It’s a remote part of town, nothing to see beyond scattered concrete houses of sort, cordoned off by tall fences with barbed wires on top.

“Tony?” Steve tries again.
He can leave Tony here, vulnerable as he is unconscious. Turn the lights off, kill the engine. Hide the keys in Tony’s pockets. Pray that no one will come an inch closer to the car.

Steve plucks the keys out of ignition and frisks Tony’s legs for that pocket he swears should be around here –

Bright orange eyes are suddenly staring back at him. A hand shoots out of nowhere, translucent and alight, and it closes over Steve’s forearm.

“God – Tony –”

Steve’s forearm swells as what feels like white-hot iron clamps over it that he instinctively pulls away, but Tony is not letting go.

His hand will turn to ash.

Steve’s cries harshly, agony shooting up his shoulder and when he is let go, he hurls back to the door, tripping over when it opens and smashing headlong into the grass. He’s scalded – that’s all, nothing the serum can’t handle. It’s godawful painful, that tells him his nerve receptors are still all there.

“It’s me,” Steve grits out breathlessly, his good hand clutching the other. “Just me. You’re safe, Tony. Just you and me.”

And he chants that over and over again, over the ache of his burns, willing Tony to calm down and listen to reason. This won’t scar, but he has since learnt of the volatility of Tony’s newfound powers.

The top of Tony’s tussled head peeks into view. “Steve?” he whispers, peering into the dark.

“…Hey.”

“Oh God, I am so, so sorry – I’ll get the... the bandages and stuff from the... yeah.”
And off he scuttles to the trunk to retrieve the first aid kit. He skids to a halt next to Steve and drops it on the dusty ground. With hands so shaky, he pries the lid open so forcefully that gauzes and antiseptic belches from the box. “Sorry, I didn’t mean this to happen…” Steve’s healing rates pale in comparison to Tony’s. It’s not instantaneous. Though the worst of the burns had passed, the blisters remain.

“It’s all right, calm down, Tony.”

“I can’t fucking calm down!” More antiseptic spills between them than it gets onto Steve’s arm. “I would’ve… I could’ve killed you.”

“You won’t.”

“I’m different now, aren’t I? I could seriously… hurt you, or anyone else when I sneeze —”

“I’m just as different as you are. I can handle this.”

“This is a mistake, Steve. I shouldn’t be alive. I wasn’t meant to survive that stuff! We’re on a mission, and I’ll only slow you down.”

Nothing Steve can dispute. Tony is right. He’s a liability when his powers behave unpredictably and easily tampered by emotions. Things can go wrong in more ways than they can ever be right.

“I’m not leaving you.” Steve clasps him firmly by his jaws. “If that’s what you’re getting at, then save your breath.” He leans in, and their foreheads meet. “Not leaving you.”

“I’ll kill you.”

“You won’t.”

Tony’s trembling hand comes up to close over Steve’s. He shakes his head, and fearfully, he whispers, “There’s a tightness in my chest, it’s almost constant nowadays. I’m dying, Steve. Could be the shrapnel finally doing me in. Or the poison. Listen to me – I’m saying, there’s enough blood on my hands. Yours is the last I want on.”
“We’ll figure it out. We always do!”

“Can’t cheat death, can I?”

Steve’s face shifts against Tony’s, and he pulls Tony in for a kiss, bruising and punishing because he can’t bear it. Teeth and tongues lash out as brittle frustration and fury finally breaks.

“You keep saying that,” Steve growls, and pushes Tony bodily into the side of the car. He reclaims those lips, and ignores the glint of fire in those hazel irises. “You asked me to leave when you had palladium flooding your body. I didn’t, and it was fine. We pulled through! You’re asking me that again, and you think I’m finally gonna?” He grasps the front of Tony’s shirt, and slams him again into the car. “Can’t you see?” he pleads, the lasts of his syllable cracking. “Please, can’t you see?”

“… I’m already dying, Steve. I’m not like you. I can’t live for a hundred years.”

“You can’t give me what I seek. You can’t love me.” He won’t ever forget those words, those harsh, harsh words Tony spoke of, even when he was minutes away from making love to this body. When the rage and lust of the tonic consumed him, Steve let Tony mark him, claim him. That feels like a lifetime ago.

“Steve, please understand!”

“I won’t leave you. However it is between us, I won’t leave you!”

What else has he got, if not this?
Chapter 31

The night won’t last forever, so is their time for wound-licking and self-pity. Tony is first to stand up and get ready. He puts on two more layers of shirts, and with each layer of fabric the light in chest dims. He checks the trunk again and heaves a tire iron over his shoulder. Steve is so enthralled by Tony’s sudden showcase of determination that the flashlight Tony tosses his way almost hits him in the forehead. Their eyes lock, until annoyance surges in Tony’s, and he says curtly, “Bring your shield. If this were a meet-and-greet with some evil supervillain, we better dress up.”

“… You’re upset.”

Tony slams the trunk down that the car itself bounces on its suspension. “I feel like I want to poke these people in the eye for ruining my best week of the month. You just got back from an assignment, I was gonna take you out on a test drive with Mark 42. Now Insight is picking us off one at a time, maybe SHIELD is evil, Mark 42 is scraps, and I’m presumed dead. My life is a sitcom, that’s what.”

Maybe they do deserve to be upset a bit.


They cross the single lane road and make their way to the wrought iron gates. Padlocks the size of their hands and chains as thick as their wrists warn them against trespassing. The signage helps, too, and Steve stares at it unblinkingly, refusing to take a step closer while Tony is already getting friendly with the mechanisms.

“Geez, antique. Steve, introduce your knuckles to this thingy here!”

Under the welcoming address of “Trespassers will be prosecuted”, the words “Camp Lehigh” take up most of the space. The black paint used to write them are almost completely flaked off. The “p” is barely visible. Tony abandons the gates and joins Steve by the signage. “Camp… Lehigh?” he reads aloud. “Makes sense. Looks military on the other side of the fence.”

It was. Harking back to 1914, it was first built as a base for the US Army. By 1943, it was repurposed into a screening facility for candidates deemed suitable for Project Rebirth. It was as much of a home to the scientists and consulting physicians as it was to the soldiers. To Steve, it was where it all started. His beginning.
“Is something wrong, Steve?”

Not taking his eyes off the signboard, he croaks, “You sure this is the place?”

“The files came from these coordinates.”

“… So did I.” Steve trudges to the gates and makes quick work of the locks and chains. “This camp is where I was trained.”

There’s barely enough lights for human eyesight to function, but Steve hesitates to turn on the flashlight.

“Just turn it on. They probably know we’re coming.”

Still, a bunch of LEDs aren’t enough to illuminate the grounds. They stumble around half-blind, and Tony makes sure to stay half a step behind Steve. “Place still looks familiar? Changed much?”

“A little.”

“What should we go first?”

“What do they need to access something like Insight? A supercomputer? A Pentium Two?” But Tony suddenly grasps him by the wrist, pulling him to a stop. Steve cocks his head at an angle. A curious “What?” goes unspoken.

“Shoeprints. Give me that.” Tony takes the flashlight and shines it where indeed, multiple sets of shoeprints run parallel to theirs. He shines along the ground, following the trail where it ends at the doorsteps leading up a single-storey building.

“Someone’s been here recently,” Tony whispers, and kills the flashlight. “Says ‘ASP’ on the door. What does it mean?”
Steve readjusts his hold on his shield, and bids for Tony to follow. ‘’Ammunition supply point’. Army regulations forbid storing ammunition within five hundred yards of the barracks.” Pausing at the door, he lifts his shield to eye level. “This building is in the wrong place.” And promptly brings it down onto the handle, dislodging it completely that the door yawns open. “Try the switch next to you.”

Tony only flicks one up to humour Steve, and to his astonishment, the lights come on, row by row without delay. Every fluorescent tube works perfectly. Ventilation is better than decent. Airy. It’s been lived in for a while. But the interior décor is what completes the experience. On the far wall directly facing them is SHIELD’s sprawling emblem painted in gold. It’s flanked by the framed portraits of one Margaret Carter, one Phillips Chester and – Tony swears loudly when his shin rams into the side of a table – Howard Stark.

Under their names on the golden plaque, he reads “Founders of SHIELD”.

“Hey, Dad,” he mutters sullenly as he stoops to massage his leg. The flesh is glowing faintly, and he swiftly turns away that his back faces the portraits. Stupid, stupid – there’s no shame in this.

“You OK? Broke anything?”

“The table is fine.”

“Tony, I mean –”

“I’m fine. I’m not torching anything.” He hobbles away from Steve and the wall, and finds the dusty typewriter particularly interesting. “So, this is SHIELD.”

 “… Maybe where it started.”

“Who’s the girl?” Tony nods at Margaret Carter, whose picture is mounted on Howard’s left.

To that, Steve says nothing. He goes to investigate a giant bookshelf pressed up against the western wall where a faint whoosh of wind is coming from. Tony hears it too. Since the windows are all boarded up, the next obvious observation is –
“If you’re already working in a secret office,” Steve grunts as he throws his weight at the shelves, tugging them to a side. It gives, it parts, to reveal a hidden elevator. Those older ones with railings for a door and a lever to operate. “After you.”

The elevator only goes one way: down. The basement too has running electricity. There’s light and heating and a steady hum of machineries. Sounds lively, like Tony’s personal workshop in Malibu – when he still had one.

“ENIAC,” Tony exclaims triumphantly. The floorspace is almost completely occupied by hunks of metals with cables protruding from the back and tapes to store data. They’re what people call the ancestors of modern computers. “Electronic Numerical Integrator and Calculator. Probably weighs thirty tonnes, uses more than eighteen thousand vacuum tubes.” He waves at a jumble of patch cords and some three thousand switches beside them. “Fun fact. ENIAC might’ve started it all, but I’m betting SHIELD was loaded enough to invest in second or third gens. I heard Dad mentioning a MANIAC once. Oh, it is a MANIAC.” Tony points at a faded sticker. “See?”

The computer screen behind Steve – about an inch above Steve’s right ear – suddenly flickers. Tony’s grip on his tire iron tightens. “Did you touch anything, Steve?”

“No. Did you?”

“No. Turn around.”

A line speeds across the screen, stark green against black. “What is it?” Steve asks, and watches it blink thrice before it disappears.

“A command prompt, written in the same language as the programme on Nick’s drive.”

“Which you can’t understand. How are we getting information we can’t understand?”

That’s the million-dollar question. “At least, we know we’re at the right place.”
Chapter 32

Steve graciously moves away from the computers. It’s crammed, and better Tony here than him.

“This can’t be the data-point,” Tony concludes after one sweep across the monitors. “This technology is ancient.”

So, Steve taps him lightly on the shoulder, and points at the table. “An Apple keyboard and a USB drive port, Tony. Still too ancient?”

The way Tony’s eyes twinkle suggest not. “You speak German, I speak English. I don’t know how we’re gonna dance, darling.”

The command prompt that races across the monitor before them freezes. It doesn’t blink anymore, and it’s now mysteriously English.

“Initiate system?” Considering the risks of responding to an ancient computerware, Tony deliberates for two glorious seconds and shrugs. He types, “Y, E, S, spells yes.” And the sounds of machines waking up from a deep slumber booms around them. They ought to be wary, but Tony can’t help grinning. This is his comfort zone, he’s in his element. “Shall we play a game?”

Steve shoots him a look of exasperation.

“It’s from a movie that…”

“Yeah, I saw it.”

The monitor to their right, by far the largest in the room, projects a ghastly digital semblance of a man’s face. Two eyes, a nose… is all Tony can make sense of. It speaks with an accent, one Steve seems familiar with, his lips already pressing to a thin line. “Rogers, Steve. Born 1918. Anthony, Stark. Born 1970.”

A camera is training on them. The ocular zooms in on Tony as he shifts to stand closer to Steve. “It’s some kind of recording,” he whispers, upon which the monitor buzzes, “I am not a recording. I may
not be the man I was when the Captain took me prisoner in 1945, but I am.”

The monitor that ran the command prompt flashes once, and a mugshot of a balding, middle-aged man greets them. Tony scrutinises his flat features, and frowns. “Have we met?”

“Arnim Zola was a German scientist who worked for the Red Skull,” Steve replies coolly. “He’s been dead for years.”

“First correction, I am Swiss. Second, look around you. I have never been more alive! In 1972, I received a terminal diagnosis. Science could not save my body. My mind, however – that was worth two hundred thousand feet of data banks. You are standing in my brain.”

“So, you’ve digitalised your memories and dare I say, consciousness? They have this in the 70’s? I’m starting to feel like an intellectual disappointment in the face of my forefathers’ achievements.”

The camera rests firmly on Tony’s head. “You’re a Stark.”

“That, I am. And I see you’re using my company’s proprietary facial recognition algorithm to match my handsome face to a database. Which? SHIELD? New York-Presbyterian Hospital? Redtube?”

“You’re Howard’s boy, aren’t you?”

“Catch up, Dr Zola. My family tree is all over the Internet, I’m sure.”

Steve clears his throat. “How did you get here?”

“Invited. It was Operation Paperclip after World War II. SHIELD recruited German scientists with strategic values. They thought I could help their cause. I also helped my own.” Zola’s mugshot fades out, and is immediately replaced by a silhouette of the Red Skull, and the ominous HYDRA emblem.

Steve turns to face Zola’s monitor. “HYDRA died with the Red Skull.”
“Cut off one head, two more shall take its place.”

“Prove it.”

“Accessing archive.” The mugshot of a man in his thirties with an impossibly high forehead is next projected. The name “Johann Schmidt” is scribbled over it. “HYDRA was founded on the belief that humanity could not be trusted with its own freedom. What we did not realise, was that if you try to take that freedom, they resist. The war taught us much. Humanity needed to surrender its freedom willingly. After the war, SHIELD was founded, and I was recruited. The new HYDRA grew. A beautiful parasite inside SHIELD.”

Tony can’t believe they drove two days to listen to a madman raving. Suggesting that SHIELD is inherently HYDRA? He doesn’t really root for the home team, but this is ridiculous. “That’s impossible. SHIELD would have stopped you.”

“… Accidents will happen, Anthony Stark.”

The mugshot of the masked, metal-armed assassin replaces Schmidt’s. Next on is a CCTV footage so grainy it doesn’t mean much, but the silver arm is unmistakable.

“I know that car.” Tony rushes forward to the monitor. By then the images switch again, and he’s staring at the black-and-white portraits of his father and mother, crossed out haphazardly with thick paint. A newspaper article shows up next, bearing the headline “Howard and Maria Stark Die in Car Accident –” dated December 17, 1991.

There’s an unmistakable cheer in Zola’s artificial intonations. “HYDRA created a world so chaotic that humanity is finally ready to sacrifice its freedom to gain its security. Once the purification process is complete, HYDRA’s new world order will arise. We won, Captain. Your death amounts to the same as your life – a zero sum.”

Tony rotates his tyre iron with enough force it zings as it cuts through the air, and he helps himself to demolishing Zola’s monitor in three violent strikes.

The newspaper article fizzles out of focus, and Zola’s avatar reappears. “As I was saying…”

“Tony, calm down.”
This is him calming down. He tugs his arm away from Steve’s consoling grasp, and wrenches his tyre iron from the heart of the monitor. He does not swing it again.

“You wrote a programme for the Lemurian Star. It launched a satellite meant to sync with Insight Hellicarriers. What’s your game?”

“Project Insight requires insight.”

The eyes on the Iron Man helmet suddenly shine brilliantly white. Steve almost drops it when JARVIS says, “Sir, incoming short range ballistic in thirty seconds.”
Chapter 33

“Who fired it?”

“SHIELD,” JARVIS helpfully supplies.

“We have to go, Steve.”

Thirty seconds, only thirty seconds – that’s not even enough time to go back to the car. Where are they going to run to?

“Steve!” Tony forcibly removes Steve from his stupor and drags him to the elevator. They’re not going to make it. “Steve, we got to go!”

“I’m afraid I’ve been stalling, Captain.” Think, Steve bids himself to think! They’re standing in the heart of a military base camp meant to house an army of super-soldiers. The base of operation for Insight, if the venomous admissions from Zola’s tongue are truthful. There’s got to be failsafe in anticipation of airstrikes. “Admit it, it’s better this way. We’re both of us...out of time. The algorithm is completed. Insight is ready. All we need is a cause to launch it. A pity we both won’t be there to witness the rise of a new order. Hail HYDRA!”

“Steve!”

“Get down. There’s a catch somewhere.” There’s always an underground bunker for an underground bunker with SHIELD. He just has to find it. This might not be an air-raid shelter, but some form of cover is better than none. In the dust and ashes on this good earth, he places his faith.

Tony finds it first. He pulls at a hatch beside a desk and hops right in. Steve fetches his shield, leaps in after Tony and closes the door above their head, the shield a second barrier –

He holds onto Tony like life itself. The spitting fire, hellish heat and chaos... goes on for far too long. In death’s embrace, Steve grounds himself to Tony’s presence, the flesh and bone a reminder of vulnerability – they’re not going to make it out alive. Not this time.
Can’t cheat Death forever, can they?

There’s sand in his nostril, Christ. Coal in his throat. His brows and hair are nicely singed. He coughs, and God, his throat is so raw like it’s flayed. Is he?

“Shit…”

He’s pretty certain his entire person is made up of bruises, and for that, he gives his endless thanks to the heavens above. He’s fine, he can move, he can shrug off this thick slab of concrete that’s keeping him sandwiched between freedom and doom. When the dust settles, Steve strains his ears for signs of movements. The grounds above is still scorched, so time can’t have passed too much since the drop. He dares to poke his head out of his hidey hole, and sees only darkness.

Not really. At least he has a full moon and the stars to guide his way.

“OK,” he rasps, and wets his lips with little success. “Tony, we’re good.” It’s so quiet out here, even the slightest whisper is ear-splitting. “It’s gonna be a long walk, though. But we need to move now.”

He finds purchase on large chunks of debris and rests his entire weight on them. They don’t give – structural support is good. “Tony, come on,” he hisses with urgency. Who knows if SHIELD’s coming back to comb this area. SHIELD’s not taking chances, and neither should they. He searches the ground where he had Tony pinned under him during the blast, and –

“Oh… no, no –”

He falls back onto his knees, hands hovering over Tony’s stomach, not quite sure where to put them. There’s a metal rod, long and rusty and bloody on one end where it ran cleanly through Tony. A dark stain is pooling steadily under him. Weakly, he grasps Steve’s wrist. “Will you leave me if I ask you to this time?”

But, they’ve come so far! So close to ending this together. Not now, not like this!

“Steve, listen to me,” Tony gasps, his bloody hand comes up to grip at the metal rod in front of him.
Steve can’t bear the sight, but he steels his heart, and makes to support Tony’s head in his palms. “Steve... Steve...” It’s also getting brighter, and warmer. From inside Tony, the familiar orange glow grows stronger. Tony calls out to Steve like a mantra, and his eyes flame up, his hands melting the iron into malleable goo. “God, it hurts, Steve... Steve...” Grasping it a little more firmly, he twists it and it breaks off, and his hand falls to his side.

“I got you, Tony,” he smoothens the deep creases on Tony’s brows. “I got you.”

“Next one... next one’s gonna knock me out. Can’t... focus.”

“I’ll help.” Steve thumbs away tears and blood specks on Tony’s face. “Tell me what to do.”

“... Lift me up. You're good with angles, Steve. Free... me.”

“That’ll kill you.”

“It won’t.”

“You’ll bleed out!”


It takes a different level of detachment to function at War. How many times had he parked his soul under his bed as he slung his gun across his back and marched out to flirt with Death once more? Here lies Tony, at the brink of everything, with him, his salvation. Steve reaches under Tony and gauges the way the rod bends under Tony’s weight.

“I’m sorry, Tony. I’m sorry. This will hurt.”

Holding the last of Tony’s weakened smile in his thoughts and prayers, he secures Tony’s torso in the crook of one arm, and steadies the rod with the other. And he pulls.

Tony’s dead weight slums against his chest, motionless, and fiery hot to the touch. Steve does not let
go.
The first word out of Tony’s mouth is a cuss. And it’s completely justified. He’s been to Hell and back, multiple times in the span of a week, so fuckity fuck, if spewing vulgarities helps him feel better, he will.

“Language.”

“Oh… fuck me…”

He blinks away the dark spots in his vision and winces at the gunk in his eyes. Disgusting, the afterlife is still so… biological. Absolutely unforgiveable.

“I want to give Saint Pete a piece of my mind. Heaven sucks.”

“You’re not dead, Tony,” Steve laughs with relief. “Just lie down. Rest up.”

He hears Steve perfectly, all right. And underneath him, the ground rumbles with the roaring of a straight-4 piston engine. The crown of Steve’s blonde head peeks from the top of his seat. “Yeah, I’m good,” Tony groans, and with great effort, props himself up with an elbow. “Huh. I feel surprisingly normal.”

“Is that sarcasm? I can’t tell.”

“I’m fine, not joking. Did all that just happen, or was it a bad dream?” He was human kebab not too long ago, wasn’t he? He lifts his shirt and presses his palm to the exit wound – the supposed exit wound in his stomach – but finds the skin and flesh pristine. “Should I slap myself just to make sure?”

“It’s the… whatever it is in your body. It heals you. Your vitals are good.”

That’s the kind of deus ex machina his life sorely needs. “I’m starving.”
Steve chuckles some more. “I know. I stopped by a gas station to get more water. It’s straight out from the tap, so you want to boil it first.”

Walking off a lethal injury, boiling water in the car… he’s awesome, period. He’s really warming up to his powers. In between gulps of liquid monosodium glutamate, Tony sort of hangs around the backseat and makes himself comfortable as Steve drives them to –

“Holy shit – Steve, why are we back in DC?” Three signboards tell him so.

“SHIELD is compromised, Tony, with HYDRA. That’s good enough a reason to be back in DC.”

“Yeah, but we’re not gonna walk up to Pierce and demand him to step down nicely, are we?”

“That’s the plan.”

“Jesus Christ – OK, pull over. *Pull over*, or I’ll torch the front seat.”

He gets it, all right? Their lives have flashed before their eyes several times. They’re all a bit tired, a bit agitated. He gets. He also gets that they’re not in the best mental capacity to make such game-changing decisions, but they haven’t lost their goddam marbles, have they? Because launching a coup d’état out of nowhere amounts to exactly that. In spades.

“Deep breath, Steve. You’re not thinking straight.”

“You’ve been out for four hours, Tony. I have all the time to think this through.”

“You mean, you didn’t spend those hours weeping over my dead body.”

“… I do not, and you’re not dead. All I did was carry you out of the bunker and ditch you in the backseat and let nature take care of itself.”

“That aside,” Tony scratches at the stubbles littering his chin. “This is a new car. Smells unfamiliar. You bought it?”
“Borrowed it.”

“Where did Captain America learn how to steal a car?”

“Nazi Germany. And we’re borrowing. It’s high time for a change, too, in case they have eyes on our plates.”

Steve runs his plans by him, which he finds palatable, and that is saying a lot because nothing short of a miracle that a wanted fugitive and a dead man can do to unmask one of the world’s most trusted, and guarded intelligence agency. Steve’s knack for exploiting the best his men can offer shows.

“The Helicarriers will be launched eleven in the morning tomorrow. There’s an afterparty in the White House, if you’re interested in attending.”

“Pass. Where’s Insight’s mission control?”

“Best guess? Triskelion.”

“You know the way in and out that building.” Steve nods, affirmative. “You know which room they’ll use. The people likely to be made in-charge of the launch.”

“Yes. Not all are HYDRA. That much, I am certain.”

Come to think of it, they might just be enough to bring the reign of HYDRA to an end. Maybe. “There’s no system I can’t hack into, Steve. I’ll take care of Insight and the ships’ launching. Jam it, scatter the signals. So many ways to keep those birds on the ground. But, you know that’s just a stopgap. ‘Cut off one head, two more shall take its place’. If it’s not Insight this time, they’ll just think of something else. We got to dismantle the organisation itself. And how are we gonna do that? SHIELD and HYDRA just don’t belong in the same breath, pretty sure your words and mine alone aren’t going to cut it.”

Steve averts his gaze and doesn’t reply. He pushes the gear into drive, and with a tone of finality, he says, “Regardless, Insight cannot go online.”
That, Tony has nothing against.
Their journey towards the heart of the city is that of a typical midday traffic on a DC highway. Still no roadblocks or any indication of a nationwide hunt for one Steve Rogers, despite all the hoo-hah on the media.

“Doesn’t add up,” Tony wonders aloud, and glances at the sidemirror in case another bomb comes their way.

“They want us here.”

And wise man once said, don’t tempt fate. Something bulky thuds above their head, on the roof of the car, and Tony’s shocked and well-timed cussing drowns in the smattering of bullets riddling the backseat. Steve loses control of the car and swerves sharply into the divider, but Tony doesn’t see anything tumbling off with the inertia. The impact activates their airbags, dousing yet another stream of screeching expletives.

“Steve! Shield!”

Steve takes hold of his shield in the nick of time when a metal arm punches through the driver’s window, fingers curling futilely against the smooth, cool surface of the vibranium disc.

“Out of the car, Tony!”

“My helmet!”

“Get out!”

He kicks the door off in one try – it’s already half-hanging from the hinge – and vaults over the divider. Why are there cars – God, why are there still cars coming this way? Tony runs like life demands it, waving maniacally and yelling at these suicidal drivers and motorcyclists to clear the fucking highway. He doesn’t know what’s happened to Steve, or the assassin, if one of them has died or not –
The ground trembles with two successive explosions. The heat scorches his very back, but he keeps running. Something inside him tells him that Steve’s OK. Regrettably, without the suit, this is one battle above his paygrade. This isn’t even about managing a goddam ego. Without the suit, he’s a body ripe for the bagging.

Yet amidst the ashes and fire, there are still babies bawling. Chaotic cries flood in from his left and right. He stops to survey the pile of cars ditched haphazardly on the road. He has a job to do, he does. Crowd control.

“Move it! Get away!”

He speeds off again, but with more purpose this time. He makes sure to check every vehicle, every seat, and personally escorts the injured to a clearer ground. He dares not to check the scurry behind him. He hears Steve. He hears every grunt, every gasp, but the force of Steve’s blows never weakens.

“I got you, kid.” Tony grabs the hand of a five-year-old strapped to the passenger seat and pulls him into his chest.

It’s the least he can do, and he’s doing the best he could.

“Thank you, Sir,” the father of the child grabs Tony by the wrist, clammy and shaky.

“Keep running. Don’t look back.”

“Wait, Sir, in my car,” the older man swallows again. “The glovebox. I have a gun. Take it. It’ll serve you better.”

Tony nods his thanks, and returns to the car. There is a gun in the glovebox. A Smith & Wesson 9 mm semi-automatic pistol. Loaded, he makes sure.

A heavy thud echoes in the distance and Tony sees the unmistakeable reflection of sunlight on vibranium steel on the tarmac. Where’s Steve?
“Shit.”

He charges into the fray. He doesn’t think it, his legs just moved. He picked up the shield and spots Steve half-slumped against the side of a dented bus. The assassin has his gun trained on Steve’s head —

“Steve!”

Tony flings the shield, and immediately opens fire at the assassin. The few shots that did not go wide bounce of his metal arm – one ricochets that it grazes him in the shoulder.

“Tony, run!”

He heals. He heals! Focusing heat into the now-emptied pistol, it burns red hot in his grasp. The black mask the assassin has on that covers more than half of his face – Tony only notices that – doesn’t effectively quell the look of surprise in his grey eyes.

“Miss me?” And Tony launches the half-melted pistol at his head. A wan smirk graces his lips when the assassin attempts to catch the projectile – how thick can he be? – and he bolts towards Steve, not waiting to see if it burns a hole in the assassin’s palm.

“Idiot!” The first thing Steve greets him with. “Now we’re both cornered!”

“I’m saving your ass here! Get up!”

Multiple silhouettes dawn on them, and Steve pushes Tony behind him. “Get back!”

Their line of vision cuts off as Steve raises his shield, blocking a barrage of bullets spraying at them. Yeah, they are cornered. Idiot.

“Steve, go around the bus on the count of three.”

“What?”
“Three!”

And the fireball Tony has been nurturing with his right palm is thrown towards a Harley Davidson. Charred metal bits leapt magnificently into the sky in a burst of fireworks, and with it comes their strategic respite, however momentary.

“Go!” Steve lifts Tony up without effort, scuttling around the bus to gain themselves a better barricade against the enemies’ firearms.

“How many?” Tony gasps as he wipes sweat from his brows. He counts way too many feet in army boots for one metal-armed assassin.

“Seven, maybe more.”

“Shit.” They both wince as the window above their head smashes when pierced by a bullet. “What’s the plan?”

“Run.”

“Thank God.” Another window smashes, and the shards snow on them. “I was so scared you’d try arresting them or something.”

“Not suicidal. We jump down.”

They’ve run far enough along the highway that they’re on a flyover already? It’s a two-storey-high jump. “I’ll break my legs,” Tony deadpans, and launches another fireball over the bus.

“You heal, don’t you?”

“… You used to care a great deal about my safety.”
“I still do. Stay close to me, stay behind the shield. Throw two more of that fireballs, and we go!”

One, two –

“Go!”

Steve has an arm wrapped firmly around Tony’s waist as they dash to their freedom. A mighty leap over the barricade, over the flyover, that’s all it takes. The bullets are mere wasted effort to the shield.

“Jump!”

Tony jumps – but his collar snags and it cuts so deeply into his throat, his vision whites out – his side feels mercilessly cold, and the loss of Steve’s warmth so vivid. His body slams onto the heated tarmac that sends him curling into himself. A mechanical hand seizes him by the neck, lifting him bodily in the air. His feet find no purchase, and he struggles against the choking restrain.

All while staring down the lifeless gaze of the metal-armed assassin.
The assassin cocks his head inquisitively, studiously examining every wrinkle, every bead of sweat on Tony’s face. Under the pressure of his enemy’s bloodthirsty watch, Tony perseveres. He looks past the long lash and hollowness in the grey irises – what his parents must’ve stared down in their final moments. No amount of hurt that his body is caving under can compare – can ever compare to his surging grief.

“You’re not dead,” the assassin states coldly.

Not dead. Not yet. And for as long as there is breath in his breast, he has a chance to end this. Any price is worth paying. Tony accumulates what’s left of air and might in his lungs and wills them all to fire, when the metal fingers around his neck clench down upon his windpipes.

It’s all Tony can do to wheeze pitifully, waiting for the ultimate strike. Another hand – flesh and blood – that’s familiarly ruthless creeps under his shirt. Fingernails scrape against the valleys of his abdominal packs, but up and up the hand goes until its thumb scrapes against the housing of his arc reactor. Without slightest gust of a warning the assassin tears the orb from the very socket in his chest. The wiring, the electromagnet – the plasma that Pepper finds disgusting once upon a time, the Howardium cassette that Steve helped create – all ripped apart from his body in one swift tug.

At least Obadiah had the decency to leave him the way he found him. The damage is irreparable. Not without the surgeons, his lab, and the spare arc reactors he’d personally delivered to the bottom of the Pacific. Obviously convinced that his handiwork will have a more lasting effect this time, the assassin hurls Tony’s limp body through the air where it thuds unceremoniously onto the front of a car. Tony feels the flesh of his back rendered apart by shards of laminated glass. A burning sensation informs him that these wounds are meaningless.

It doesn’t matter. He only wishes for Steve to find his swift escape. Through the whitish haze in his vision, Tony tracks the assassin the best he can, and watches him abseil to where Steve is. That idiot, probably still hopeful, still waiting to catch Tony should he fall. He can’t, and he feels so sick to the stomach that he’s bringing only death unto Steve.

The gaping hole in his chest is closing. He’s lighting up again, his mouth wide open in a silent plea.

“Mr Stark? Get the medic!”
He sees red, and orange and the fucking sun – his shirt is disintegrating.

“Shit, shit - back up, back the fuck up!”

Who’s yelling? Who stands before him?

And Tony reaches into the concaveness of his sternum, bloody fingers grappling with half-hanging circuits and metal bits. He can’t imagine the look on these people’s faces – these bystanders surrounding him. He’s a mess, God, he’s a mess in here, but he knows deep down that this is right. Gripping the edge of the case, he fully embraces the sweltering heat and flames, and completes the destruction of his arc reactor.

He rips it all out from his heart.

Seriously, who is yelling? Everyone is more freaked out about this than he is, and he’s the one lying in the pool of his own blood. And dust and ash and icky bodily fluids. Yet the longer he lies still, the slower life seems to ebb away. The better he feels. His vision clears, his breathing eases, his damn hearing sharpens –

“Rumlow, do you copy?” a nearby walkie-talkie buzzes.

“Status, Rollins.”

“Rogers secured.”

“OK. Bring him up.”

There’s still an opportunity. They don’t know what Tony is capable of. With Rumlow’s back turned against him, he gathers the last of his power in his right hand –

“Tony –” Steve calls frantically. They’d hooked him up by his waist and reverse-bungeed him up to the flyover. Immense relief floods Tony’s system when he sees that Steve is safe and sound, still whole, but it’s too late. “Tony, no, no –”
Rollins kicks Steve in the knees, forcing him to the ground. The newly conjured fireball stays in his palm, and disperses to hot air when the barrel of Rollins’ pistol digs into Steve’s temple. “It’s over, Mr Stark. One wrong move and Rogers get it.”

STRIKE is supposed to be above this.

“Whose side are you on, Rumlow?” Steve growls tightly as Rollins frees him from the bungee cord.

“… I’m loyal to the cause, Cap. I have been, and always will be.”

“The side you’re on is HYDRA! You know better!”

And, scene. That fireball had cost him the last of his strength. Tony lets himself be manhandled onto a stretcher, and is meekly towed into a non-descript black truck. “Take them away,” he hears Rumlow bark before the sky he’s gazing at turns to boring felt. A great adventure this has been, after days of beating the odds and surviving.

“Where are we going?” he tries his luck, and gifts the attending paramedic his most cheerful half-wince.

“The Triskelion.”

To the gallows it is.
Shenanigans! Tony thinks, shenanigans! This is a ploy to confuse him while held captive by the enemy against his will. He’s so confused… which, frankly, could be explained by the concussion he must’ve gotten when Silver Arm chuck him across the road into the windshield of that wrecked car. But, he heals speedily nowadays, doesn’t he? Which also reminds him: Tony runs both hands over his chest where his arc reactor used to be and finds only smooth, chiselled flesh. He’s a whole boy again! Is this how a normal body function? He’s been missing out a lot. No more perpetual ache and deep-settled heaviness in his core. No more need to be mindful of how he sleeps at night. No more freaking apnoea to worry about!

Hello world! It’s good to be back!

As he stays still on the gurney flanked by SHIELD paramedics, he takes stock of all the chemicals they’re pumping in his body. He sort of feels the effects however momentarily before his superpowers digest them – neutralise them – to render these xenobiotics ineffective. He ought to rename his powers, by the way. Christen it with a cool moniker. Cooler than “Captain America” and regrettably, “Iron Man”.

The Extremis.

Done deal.

SHIELD paramedics want to keep him hydrated, doped to the gills and alive. Didn’t they just do their darndest best to kill him? He hasn’t gotten signals this mixed up since Bern, 1999.

Where is Steve Rogers?

“Where is Steve?” He asks the lady to his left. “I just… you know, we’re best buddies. Can I request for a shared cell?”

The nurse takes one good look at him, and he smiles toothily. She turns to her colleague. “That’s impossible. He shouldn’t even be conscious.”

Suddenly, his truck screeches to a halt, the inertia throwing everyone off their feet. His gurney rolls forward until it slams into the wall, and he clutches frantically at the edge of his railings. Everyone’s
panicking, so this must be unprecedented. Think, he has to think –

Gun shots – he hears guns going off like never before, and he’s sitting duck if he doesn’t get a move on. So are the paramedics. He sees them so spooked that they daren’t moved an inch. He leaps off the gurney and grabs two of them – the ones huddled nearest to him – and yells at the rest to get their butts off the floor and run.

Then, the door to his truck swings open and sunlight pours in – blindingly brilliant – and Tony shoves the paramedics to the side. He fully expects bullets of the deadliest calibre to riddle him through, but only one canister is thrown over his shoulder. White gas quickly fills up the space and – tear gas? – his eyes and his throat feel flayed. It won’t knock him out – he heals, remember? – so he suffers through them, and readies a fireball in both hands.

Bon appétit, suckers.

Before the punch connects with a nose, the mouth beneath it cries, “Don’t attack, Tony!” but too late, he can’t stop it. The flames disappear, but he’s still hot, and his body falls forward with the force of his attack. His assailant parries it, and with great skill pins him up against the side of the truck.

“Calm down, it’s me,” the person pleads. “It’s me.” His arms and neck are released, and Tony spins around. Steve Rogers is looking back at him, very much alive though noticeably roughed up. Looking past Steve’s shoulder is hell on earth. The trail of wretchedness indicates massive firepower involved, and some ballsy combatants mounting such an ambush. Who have all those elements? And in spades?

“I’ll explain later,” Steve pulls Tony to his feet. “We have to go. Now.”

But, instead of going the sensible direction that is away from the mound of turned turtle vehicles and gas leakages, Steve marches through them, and towards yet another black truck that screams suspiciously of SHIELD. Tony’s instinct is to knock Steve out, heave him over his shoulder and runs the hell away, when the door slides open to reveal –

“My heart can’t handle all these.”

Yet another SHIELD agent – says so on her Kevlar vest – who beckons them to hurry. Steve breaks into a run. Tony catches up easily, and they all pile into the back of the truck, upon which the driver accelerates away into freedom. They both sit opposite her, Steve completely at ease while Tony
teetering on the edge of his seat.

Even his Extremis can’t handle the excitement. Just too much! Tony’s hand shoots up in the air. “I want to ask the question first. You’re a lovely person, I’m sure, but you’re SHIELD, and I’m unfriending everyone SHIELD.” A tangerine-sized fireball erupts in the centre of his palm. “Who are you?”

She’s tough, he’ll give her that. She looks completely unfazed by his threat, and only after gazing into his eyes for one full minute does she glance at the flame, and smirks. “My name is Maria Hill, and I’m loyal not to SHIELD, but to Nick Fury.”

“News flash, honey. Fury is dead. So, to whom do you owe your allegiance to?”

Her lips stretch wider, and she doesn’t speak again.

“Lady –”

“Tony, that’s enough.” Steve pulls the flaming arm down. “I’ve known Maria since SHIELD took me in. I trust her.”

“Yeah? Like how you’ve known Rumlow? How you trusted him? His pal put a gun to your head, Steve. You remember that?”

“Neither Rogers nor I can change your mind if you refuse to change it yourself,” Maria interjects coolly. “Believe it, Mr Stark, I understand where you’re coming from. And that’s smart. I expect nothing less of the invincible Iron Man.” Her eyes rake southward, past his chin until they settle squarely on his chest. “Be patient, and I will show you proof.”

“Right. Better not disappoint me, Hill. I’m allergic to traps these days. I break out in flames and pandemonium.”

“… Oh, you won’t. I guarantee you.”
Chapter 38

The most dangerous place is the safest, Tony respectfully disagrees. He can’t help his growing anxiety as the Triskelion looms closer, and wonders if this is an elaborate trick by Agent Hill. If that’s even her real name. Steve either has perfected the art of poker face, or is honestly untroubled by the turn of event, which to Tony means equal amount of complacency and idiocy. They’re on the road that will take them to one of the larger unloading bays, and more than twice in the last thirty seconds he’s been eyeing the door, in case he has to dive out of a speeding vehicle and attempt escape.

Yeah, no, to hell with Hill.

Before Tony can begin activating the right brain synapses to enact his great escape, the truck swerves sharply to the right onto an off-beaten road, one that Tony has no idea existed. For good reasons, dammit – they just drove into a concrete barricade. They should’ve crashed, but the drive is still as smooth as silk, like the barricade he sees is thin air. He turns around so abruptly his neck creaks, and lordy, there it is – the barricade their truck just runs into, intact and pristine.

“Holographic camouflage.”

“I know what that is.”

He has some cool holographic tech in his vaults, but they’re primarily used for displays – for work and entertainment. Like the Iron Man mascot that zips manically across the Tower’s foyer to greet and impress his guests. Innocuous purposes that don’t double as smokescreen against a secret sanctuary located a mere five hundred metres away from the Triskelion compound.

“You and your gang have been hiding out here since?”

“Since Fury was hit by the Winter Soldier.”

“The who?”

Maria exchanges a look with Steve, and sighs dramatically. “Looks like we’ll have to bring you up to speed when we reach.”
As with the barricade, a warehouse – what must be the base of operation – pops abruptly into view as they drove past an ominous signboard that says, “Caution; bear in area!” Their truck rumbles on before it parks itself near an entryway, guarded by heavily armed SHIELD agents twice the size of Steve Rogers.

Maria is first to alight, and they salute her.

“At ease, Agents.” She steps aside as Steve and Tony emerge behind her. “Look who’s joining us.”

They must be ecstatic to welcome their new guests into their fold, judging by their slack expression and fingers tightening over the trigger. The one on the right has the right idea. “How sure are we they’re who they are?”

“Well, McBryde, I saw Rogers slap a pickup towards a HYDRA mook with his bare hands, and as for Stark… actually, thank you for reminding me. Arrest him.”

“Whoa – hey! Hold on a damn second!” The few other Agents they rode in here with take hold of Tony’s arms and twist them around his back with immaculate efficiency. They shove him face-first against the side of the truck, and Steve’s body flickers. His first instinct is to pull them off their prey, but he stays his grounds, his teeth clenching when handcuffs are fastened around Tony’s wrists.

“Maria, what’s the meaning of this?”

“Tony Stark is not an enhanced individual. That may be an imposter.”

“It’s him. On my life, Maria, it’s really him.”

“What’s the deal with the fire? Last time we checked, he’s a promiscuous businessman with a knack for tinkering, and I’ll stop here because I’m being polite.”

“Sure,” Tony grits out. “You forgot tech visionary and philanthropist.” That earns him another forceful shove against the truck, and Steve has had enough. He stills the unruly agent by his shoulder, and six crosshairs instantaneously appear over his torso.
“Rogers, at ease. We are not the enemies.”

“Trust is a two-way street, Maria. You are manhandling an ally of SHIELD, and I hate to break it to you, they come in rather short supply these days. Let him go. He’s not who you should be concerned about.”

“He sets things on fire with his thoughts, Steve. Tell me I’m not justified to be a little bit worried.”

“You mentioned the Winter Soldier?” Tony grunts with difficulty. He wriggles under the offensive vice grips because he needs his windpipes to speak, thank you very much. “I fought him. Twice. He’s the reason I’m a Human Torch.” And because he’s an idiot with no sense of self-preservation, he continues, “Lady, if I’m serious about hurting you, I’ll be torching this ground to kingdom come right now. Think! I survived this Winter Soldier twice, the SOB who did Nick in. You tell me if I’m joking.” The crosshairs on Steve’s chest waver, and Tony decides to go in for the kill. “Let’s switch up the POV. You don’t trust us, I don’t trust you either. You could be in cahoots with Alexander Pierce for all I know. So, walk your talk. You say you have proof.”

They’re next escorted to the back of the complex, either to the place they safeguard said proof, or to the shooting grounds. Tony chews on the inside of his cheeks as they walk. If they’re going to be executed, yeah, this one is on him. To his surprise, they are lead into a smaller standalone cabin that smells strongly of disinfectant, it reminds him more of a hospital ward than a fort.

Maria stops in front of a plain door, one hand on the knob. “Please keep your voices down. You can do the cussing outside afterwards.”

She opens the door, and they all file in, and fucking hell –

“About damn time,” Nick Fury croaks at the sight of them, draped in a white hospital gown and half-reclined on his bed. Wires and tubes snake around him, but he has never looked more alive. “Lacerated spinal column, cracked sternum, shattered collarbone, perforated liver, one hell of a headache. Your visiting is my best kind of painkillers.” His lone eye twinkle with excitement. “Welcome aboard, gentlemen.”
Steve stumbles closer to Fury’s bed, and braces the railings. “They cut you open,” he whispers with disbelief, “your heart stopped.”

“Tetrodotoxin B. Slows the pulse to one beat a minute. A… rather talented scientist developed it for stress. Didn’t work so great for him, but we found a use for it.”

“Why all the secrecy? Why not just tell us?”

“Any attempt on the director’s life had to look successful,” Maria replies as she rubs a spot between her eyes.

Tony would’ve sympathised. Hiding from a near-ubiquitous outfit specialising in covert operations must be tough. Really, he would. “You don’t trust us enough to tell us.” He could relate. Up to thirty minutes ago, he was supposed to be lost to Davy Jones’ locker. What a relief not having a bullseye on the back of his skull for a change. Can’t kill him if he was already dead.

“You wanted proof, this is your proof,” Maria nods curtly at Fury’s bed, and pins her attention on Tony again. “Your turn.”

“… Sure. What can we do for you?”

Trust that sadist of a lady to get them to cooperate in the most unsavoury manner. Tony sits on yet another gurney, naked from the waist up and shivering under the poorly regulated air-conditioning. He has been on gurneys enough to last a year, Christ, he is not happy when the doctors make him stay in another one for another hour. Minimum. It’s cold enough that he wants to conjure a friendly flame the size of a golf ball, and what he wants, he gets. But the nurse freaks out when she sees it, and that’s how he ends up with two SHIELD agents totting guns standing guard by his door.

Steve is in the adjacent room. He hopes Steve doesn’t notice the extra security.

They take samples from his body. They scrape dirt from under his fingernail, take buccal swaps and
blood clot from his skin. Forensics work, he guesses. They want to track down the Winter Soldier. When they ask him to strip to his non-existent underwear, he gladly takes his pants off, because if streaking takes him one step closer to his parents’ murderer, why not? They also question him about the Extremis, and he tells them all he knows – which amounts to zero scientific details – and their disappointment is ostensible. They have nothing on how he feels inside. This stuff has likely integrated with his entire genome, think he isn’t at least just as curious about it?

“We’re done here, Mr Stark. Captain Rogers is waiting for you at your quarter.”

“… A quarter? As in, a room? I have a room here?”

“Yes. Exit and turn to your right. Take the elevator to Level Six. Look for number… you know what?” The staff grinned. “You’ll know it when you see it. Don’t blame the janitor. He’s a fan.”

Tony taps him again on the back when he makes to leave. “I have a favour to ask of you.”

“… Depending on what you’re asking, I’m afraid.”

“Fair enough. I need you to take a chest X-ray for me.”

The doctor immediately closes the door behind them, locks it twice and turns his back against it. Tony might’ve imagined a bead of sweat cascading the side of his face.

“You’re overreacting, Doctor… uh…”

“Goodman.”

“Dr Goodman. What will it take you, hmm? Ten, twenty seconds? Nobody has to know.”

“Oh my God. You are a spy, aren’t you?” Goodman hisses, the vein in his temple swelling. People have such an imagination around here.

“No! OK, you know what? If you find anything weird, you’re free to report it to your superiors. Hill,
Fury, up to you. Please,” Tony begs, “this is important.”

And then five minutes later, Tony is already skulking in the elevator that is ascending to Level Six. Dr Goodman and him part ways without much ado, because there’s absolutely nothing wrong with the X-ray. Tony lifts the film to the lights above, and nothing changes. No shadows, no random, unexplained blobs.

No shrapnel. No residual casing of the arc reactor. No trauma to the bones, muscle and surrounding internal organs. He’s fine. Absolutely fine. He continues gawping at the film as he walks down the hallway, only half his mind alert and actively searching for his door. Which isn’t much of a challenge really, because said door has a huge portrait of Iron Man sketched with chalk. Flattering. A masterpiece. He’s eyeball-to-eyeball with the pastel helmet when the door swings open, and he finds himself staring at a pair of shins.

“Tony? What are you doing?”

Straightening up, he clears his throat and walks past Steve into his assigned quarter. “You’re in my room. Where’s yours?”

“We’re sharing. They don’t expect guests normally, and this place is fully booked.”

There are two single beds hugging opposing walls. Each comes with a desk and a closet set flanking the bathroom. A bathroom that comes attached to this room? Small mercies, thank the Lord – and Tony pulls his shirt off and tosses it over his shoulder. He could’ve cared less if his stinky shirt lands across Steve’s face, he would murder kittens to have a good, hot shower.

Before he could take one step closer, Steve spins him around and stills him by his biceps, fingers digging into the flesh as his bulging eyes rake over the expanse of Tony’s bare chest.

“Oh…”

“Oh?” Steve’s bottom lip trembles. “What’s… where is it? Where’s the arc reactor?”

“The Winter Soldier took it.”
“We need – we need the doctor –”

“The Soldier destroyed it – Steve, Steve, listen! It’s fine. It’s OK! I heal!” Tony can’t hide the wince when Steve’s grip doesn’t ease up, but he goes on, “It hurt like a mother but I’m here. I’m all here. Look at the X-ray.” The plastic piece sits on the desk, ignored all the while. “It’s clear! The shrapnel, they’re gone. I’m not sick anymore, Steve!”

But, Steve still looks crushed. He rests his palm over Tony’s heart, and reassures himself with each strong, rhythmic pump. Warm and pliant under his touch, so different from the cold, hard steel of the arc reactor.

“… Bucky did this to you?”
Chapter 40

“Who’s Bucky?”

“I saw his face, Tony.” Steve lets Tony go, and goes to sit on the foot of his bed. “It’s him. But, it can’t be. He’s dead. He fell. I saw it.”

Tony’s going out a limb here and assumes that by “Bucky”, Steve means James Barnes, some dude from the Howling Commando. That’s the name Steve put to the facial composite Tony made days ago. “Is Bucky your pal? James Barnes from the War?”

“He’s dead.”

“Yeah, he better be. Because I hate to have to murder your friend again.” He checks the closet closest to him for toiletries. “You saw Zola’s video, Steve. I have to do this.”

“You don’t know if the video is real.”

“Damn it, Steve!” He slams the door to closet shut. Fuck the towels anyway. With thread counts that low they might as well be sieves. “I know what I saw! I know that road, that car, you think –” He bends to pick up his discarded shirt, and lassos it over his shoulder. “Forget I ever mentioned this. I’m gonna empty a fucking magazine into his brains if that’s the last thing I ever do.”

“Killing him won’t bring them back, Tony.”

“I don’t care. He killed my Mom.”

“Tony –”

“How sure are you that SOB is your friend, huh? You don’t think my parents’ blood is worth a thing, fine.” Steve shakes his head, his jaws clenched but Tony rails on, “What about Fury? What about me? Twice, Steve! Let’s say by some magical means he’s brought back to live after seventy years. Whoever he used to be, the guy he is now, he’s not the kind you save. He’s the kind you stop.”
“All I’m asking is, give me a chance. Let me talk to him. Let me be sure. I owe it to him, Tony.”

“Maybe he should think twice about shooting his victims up with poison, or plucking their hearts out, yeah? I don’t tend to play nice with people like that.”

Steve holds his hands out in a placating manner, and his demeanour changes. “You’re grieving. You’ve a lot to process.” It’s downright condescending that Tony feels his blood rush into his ears and the heat spill from his body. It takes only so little to let down the floodgates.

“I’m taking a shower.”

He swears he didn’t mean it – when Steve tries to stop him from walking away, Tony twists the entire arm around to throw Steve off his back. It would’ve worked – he has the element of surprise – but damn Steve and his super-soldier reflexes. Steve absorbs the momentum and turns it against Tony, slamming him once against the closet. It doesn’t hurt, and that’s so Steve, pulling his punches because his mortal friends can’t handle the beating. Tony grunts under Steve’s hulking body, and turns them around so Steve instead is pinned against the closet. He’ll never be Steve’s equal when it comes to hand-to-hand. Doesn’t stop him for trying. Steve’s arm flicker, and Tony locks it first with his elbow.

“I’m different now, Steve,” Tony snarls in his face, and wills the fire to erupt in his eyes. Steve’s expression pinches, but not of fear, and Tony’s insides wither. “I don’t need your pity.”

“I don’t pity you. If this makes you feel better, go on. I can take it.”

Tony blinks. “What is that supposed to mean?”

“When we cross path with the Soldier again, please, I beg you, Tony. Let me talk to him first.”

“He’s not real, Steve!”

“What is real the last couple of week? SHIELD? HYDRA? Your powers? I’m a walking billboard that resurrection is possible! It’s not that far-fetched, Tony.”
“I swear, if you get in my way, I’ll run through you.” He presses into Steve, his body melding with Steve’s form. The complement is faultless, and his arousal rises to the occasion. His forbidden desires are intoxicating, and Steve must have known it, too. His breathing quickens as he backs into the closet, but Tony is relentless. He keeps Steve prisoned. “I will, Steve.”

“No, you won’t.”

“Right, because you know me.”

“I do, Tony.” The surge of confidence shines in his eyes. “I believe there’s a good man under the pain, the suffering. I know you.”

With a swift tug, Tony pulls Steve’s sweatpants loose. He thrusts his hip into Steve’s, their cocks and balls smashing into a mess of grimy flesh. “Why won’t you fight me?” It’s a one-handed clap, a solo jig to a lonely number. Steve’s flaccid cock feels cool against his erection, and Tony rubs himself against it with fervour. “You gonna let me do anything to you for Barnes?”

“… I know you, Tony.”

Fuck it all to hell, yeah? Steve doesn’t know how far he’s willing to go with the Extremis. He can set this room on fire. Explode. He can char the brains out of Steve’s skull. All of those with an express thought. And before he knows it, there is wetness dripping off the tip of his nose, and he backpedals a safe distance away from Steve, eyes rabid as Steve slowly eases off the closet.

“I’m sorry,” Tony breathes, and he vanishes into the bathroom.
Chapter 41

For the longest hour, Tony stands under the icy cold shower with his palms flat against the smooth tiles. Water dribbles down his nose and chin. His mind is numb. Hollow. Which never happens. He doesn’t care about an engine, an arc reactor, an automated toaster – because mankind needs one of those. He only turns off the tap when his fingers become gnarly, and the Extremis taps into his noggin wondering if he wants to puff his flesh out. No, thanks.

Besides, he can only avoid Steve for so long.

He towels himself dry and almost walks out half-naked, when regret prickles at his consciousness and he puts on his old clothes. He almost… almost crossed a line. Almost hurt Steve in ways he would never forgive himself. It’s the urge to apologise that nudges him to push that door and walk out into their shared quarter – only, Steve is long gone.

It’s only four, and there’s still sunlight. He still has time to walk the grounds. Explore. Talk to Agents, to Maria or Fury. Watch the news, study the enemy. Think. Conspire. Call Pepper, maybe. So, he drapes his damp towel on the back of his chair, and slips under the blanket on one of the beds.

Steve follows the signage to the canteen, and finds himself the quietest table in a corner. A challenge really, as the number of Agents crawling the premise far exceeds expectation. It heartens even the weariest soul. It tells him there is still hope, that not all of SHIELD is corrupted.

“How are you holding up, Cap?”

A stainless-steel mug appears on his table, and Steve looks up. Maria gestures at the untaken seat across him, and he nods at it. “I’ll feel much better once we retake SHIELD, expose HYDRA to the world and remove Pierce from control.”

“You suspect Pierce the mastermind?”

“Pierce stands to gain the most after Nick’s assassination. And considering how he’s flourishing at SHIELD,” he looks up again at the TV set, and Maria follows suit. Pierce is on Fox 5, beaming at a miniature Insight Helicarrier as rows of cameras flash away. “Or someone else is pulling his strings. Either way, he runs Insight. If we want to pull the plug on it, we have to take him out.”
“HYDRA is not a one-man outfit, Rogers. If we take him out, someone else would replace him.”

“Insight requires his biometrics for authorisations. Without him, the ships cannot launch.”

Maria takes a careful sip from her mug, her eyes watchful. “You seem confident.”

“I am.”

“You’ve been on the run the past three days. Unless people start handing out government secrets on a pamphlet on the streets, I don’t see how else you could access classified information like this.”

Steve feels a glow of pride swelling in his chest that warms up his small smile. “Tony Stark.”

“Figures. Breaking into SHIELD’s database is a felony.”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures. He doesn’t do that routinely,” the edge of Steve’s lips twitch, and he fakes a light cough.

“Insight is going down tomorrow,” Maria raps her knuckles on the table top. “Fury is calling for a meeting at midnight. Your presence is expected.”

“I’ll get Tony to come.”

“His, is not.”

“You can’t exclude him from the decision making, Maria. He’s invested in this just as much as the rest of us.” Another pang of grief rocks his insides. “Maybe more than we know. I value his input.”

“He’s a businessman.”
“He may not be a soldier, but don’t underestimate his courage and wit in matters as such. We’ll only gain from his counsel. I would personally vouch for him.”

“I swear, Rogers, if he starts *wisecracking* –”

“I’ll make sure he behaves.” Convincing Maria to let Tony attend is the easy part, believe it or not. Convincing *Tony* himself, on the other hand…

Steve walks back to his room with two sets of sandwiches and steaming coffee, void of sugar and creamer. They don’t stock up on the finer things in this warehouse. He knocks on the Iron Man door twice, and opens it anyway when they go unanswered. At least Tony hasn’t locked him out of spite. Tony himself is lying on the second bed, his back against the door so Steve can’t see his face. No matter, Steve sighs, and closes the door behind him.

Tony isn’t asleep. He may not stir, he may not respond when Steve calls his name, but he guarantees the heavens above. Tony Stark is not asleep.

They need to talk.

Steve sets his food on the table and pads over to Tony’s bed. He notes the minutest tension in those shoulders, and deliberately shuffles across as loudly as he can without making it ominous. A head’s up, so to speak, for his approaching. And Tony settles back into his mattress, his back still steadfastly against Steve.

So, Steve slides onto the floor, and leans against the edge of Tony’s bed. Slowly, and softly he speaks to no one in particular, “History knows Steve Rogers as a war legend. The first super-soldier who – fallaciously reported, I must say – single-handedly turned the tide of War against our enemies. It was a glorious title to bear. Captain America. America’s favourite son.” He huffs, and shakes his head. “Nobody knows the scrawny, sickly me who used to uh, foolishly get into fights I can’t win in the back of Brooklyn alleys.” He props a knee up and rests his elbow on it. “I’d be out sniffing trouble on my own, Bucky used to say. I didn’t have many friends. Not many were suicidal enough. Save for Bucky. Saved my ass from the bigger kids one too many times. Stuck with me after my Mom passed.

“When we found out America had joined the War, we went to Goldie’s Boxing Gym downtown every day for two weeks straight. He taught me some brawling moves, and we sparred for hours on end. I swear my fingers were so cramped I thought they were gonna stay bent like that for the rest of my life!” Steve draws in a deep breath, and chuckles. “Then, we dropped by a Recruiting and Induction Centre. They gave me a 4F on the spot. Bucky was accepted. Anyway, the rest is history.
“I have his blood on my hands, Tony.” As he utters those words, his throat constricts and he digs the heel of his palm into his eyes. “It’s been seventy years, but I remember it as though it was yesterday. He was dangling off the side of the train, and I was there. I was… so close. I know if he were here, he would say, there was nothing I could’ve done. And it was OK. If there’s…” his voice breaks, and he pinches the bridge of his nose. “If there’s a chance’s chance that he’s alive, that he’s come back as the Winter Soldier somehow, I need to try to save him. I owe him that much.

“I know of the atrocities the Soldier had done in the name of HYDRA. What he did to Howard and Maria. It kills me, too, Tony. So, God help us…” he chokes, and breathes in shakily.

When in the quiet, Tony finally turns around to pat him on his head – gentle fingers running through his hair and pawing his scalp – he lets the tears run freely.
Chapter 42

The quiet and Tony Stark's sole company warms him up. He turns and catches Tony's wrist with his lips, and trails kisses along the bare flesh with care. Tony stops his ministrations with an equally gentle grip on his jaws, and coaxes him to look up. Look Tony in his eyes, and notice the burden he too carries. More tears leak out of Steve's, and Tony thumbs them away. He can't possibly ask Tony for forgiveness. But, he can let Tony in, if only to ground himself to the fact that Bucky Barnes still walks this earth! Selfish? The words when spoken solidify the fact. He needs to… to convince himself that this – everything, Bucky, Tony, HYDRA, SHIELD – is all happening.

Tony props himself up on an elbow and leans across the edge of his bed to kiss Steve fully on the lips. The curtains are drawn, so it's dim enough Steve hopes Tony can't make out the mess he's made of his face. Lips still locking and nursing the other's, he climbs onto the bed, and gratefully embraces the warm mass that is Tony. Tony, Tony, Tony –

"Don't cry," Tony whispers, and Steve digs his chin into the crook of Tony's shoulder. He shudders, and believes the last tears he's shed has seeped into Tony's pyjamas. He sneaks a hand under Tony's pants and deliberates around the pubic region, fingers toying with a small patch of dark curls. Just waiting for permission. He gets it quickly when Tony clamps his teeth about Steve's jugular, the tip of his tongue gracing the skin there. And Steve dives in. He pumps Tony's cock in earnest, already slowly gaining interest in Steve's attention. Steve craves for something else too. He straddles Tony's waist and peppers all visible areas with tear-streaked, open-mouthed kisses. He hungers for… He's done pretending to be so strong, to be the champion of everything just and right, when the very institution he's pledged his life to is crumbling before his very eyes.

His fingers hesitate by Tony's collar, and Tony stirs beneath his weight. He huffs wetly, "I'm tired, Tony."

"... I know."

The fight is never going to end, he said that once upon a time. It gives him the strength to forge on, to persevere and look into the future. To have a purpose worth living for.

"So... tired."

"You don't have to – you're not going it alone, Steve," Tony replies fiercely, and his warm, warm hands clench around Steve's biceps. "And that's a promise."
And then, Tony is shifting enthusiastically under Steve, hips bucking but not to seek more friction. Steve feels more than he sees the pants shrugged of his legs. Tony clasps his thighs against Steve’s, and his smile is genuine. “So, I’ve been thinking…”

“You’re always thinking.”

“Yeah, my downstairs brain has been thinking… that I’m ready to try something new.” Then, Tony tugs Steve’s waistband down to the knees, and playfully cups at Steve’s taut sacs. “Fuck me.”

“… It really doesn’t work like this, Tony.”

“What? Insert Tab A,” Tony taps at Steve’s very eager cock, “into Slot B.” And he folds himself by the waist as much as his early-forties body can allow. “Go to town.”

“It takes hours of preparation to do it right. I’ll hurt you.”

“I heal.”

“I know we joked about it before, but we seriously need to reconsider our growing nonchalance towards your newly-gained powers.”

“The Extremis.”

“It’ll be messy.”

“Messier than what’s going on currently, you mean?”

“Yeah.”

“… I don’t care.”
Steve hikes Tony’s legs up and folds him up until he’s lying on his tailbone, his asshole presented to Steve in all its glory. “I just showered,” Tony helpfully offers, his toothy grin withering a fraction. “I don’t have uh, condoms.”

“We can take a rain check.”

“I’ll uh, incinerate any invading pathogens?”

Steve blinks, suddenly realising that he’s about to stick his cock into a microwave-equivalent, when Tony suddenly erupts into fits of controlled laughter, hands fisting his hair into clumps. This is a serious problem here, but the ringing mirth is infectious, and Steve can’t help but break out in chuckles, too. His face feels stretched, the dried up tears a reminder of his ongoing misery. But, just this hour. He’ll have this. Have Tony.

Something else flickers on Tony’s features, and his palm flattens on Steve’s stomach. “I think… that I do, after all…” But the instance his eyes lock with Steve’s, his gaze softens, and he says instead, “Come on, old man. What are you waiting for?”

And that’s all Steve needs. He eases a finger in, praying that the Extremis would leave his digit alone. It’s warm, so very warm that it’s almost feverish. But, he keeps at it, loosening the muscles as much as he could while knowing full-well even with this half-baked preparation, it will hurt Tony as much as it’ll hurt him. Tony takes everything like a champ, the small smile encouraging.

Steve exerts just enough force to push past the tight barrier. Certainly too much for a first-timer to handle. Tony’s clenches up, and Steve stills. They go on this dance, gaining entry by the inch as Tony’s body learns to accept Steve. His cock has gone flaccid with what must be searing agony, but he makes not a single squeak, and Steve’s heart squeezes when he remembers this body he’s fucking has suffered through worse. And here, the Extremis is a God-sent. By the time Steve is fully sheathed, Tony has recovered enough that he’s back to masturbating, working his cock into a respectable rigidity.

“How well is the soundproofing?” Tony eventually gasps, both arms raised above his head to grab at his pillows. “I don’t think – don’t think I can hold back anymore.”

Steve continues drilling him into the bed. Tony can’t hurt – his body won’t let him. “You’re a closet masochist.”
“The best accusation of things I – never am! God!”

“Take this however you want it, Tony.”

“They’ll look at us funny at dinner.”

“They’re already looking at us funny.” Steve commandeers Tony’s cock with his free hand. “Don’t hold back.”

“Can’t –”

Steve empties himself into Tony first, rocking his balls against Tony’s in lazy grinds. The best part is how outraged Tony looks – that Steve wouldn’t care to wait, or let him finish first. Before he can protest – or burn Steve’s cock that’s still embedded inside him – Steve flips over to his knees, and thrusts into him, twice.

“Who says it’s over?”
It becomes immediately clear to Steve that the quarter’s soundproofing isn’t that terrific after all. As he walks the hallway alone towards the canteen, agents – young and old, male and female – cast surreptitious glances at him, all the while greeting him “Captain” with either a curt nod or a salute. They whisper, though his enhanced hearing can’t pick up the exact words. He made sure he’s properly showered, changed and shaved, so what gives? He stops by a large glass door and checks himself in the reflection, and boy oh boy, there’s a huge ass hickey over his jugular that his U-neck T-shirt cannot hide.

“You can borrow mine,” a woman chirps from around the corner before a towel – out of nowhere – suddenly smacks squarely across his face.

“… Thanks, Maria.”

“The wall’s a bit thin around here. Don’t worry, we don’t judge. But seriously, Tony Stark?” She does a little raspberry and leaves Steve to wrap that towel around his neck like a scarf. Dejectedly, he continues his way to the canteen, and wonders if Tony would hurry the heck up and share the burden of what feels like a thousand of curious stares watching him from every corner of this hideout.

Sadly, he forgets Tony is Tony wherever he is.

“Yeah, I mean, it’s Captain America,” Steve hears the booming voice before the man himself strolls into the canteen. “Saying no must amount to treason!”


“Hey, Cap!” Tony spots Steve huddled in a corner, a megawatt grin plastered over his stupid face. “They want your autograph next to mine. C’mere!”

Thirty minutes before their private affair broke out in a circus – roughly speaking, after three more orgasms on Steve’s part before he let Tony have his – Steve did the nice thing and left Tony to collect himself on the soiled bed. Tony didn’t dare to deploy the Extremis to its fullest capacity then, afraid that it would trigger the fire alarm – or more importantly, he didn’t want Steve’s dick well done. So, it hurt, of course it did. Steve sat beside him, sympathising in silence as Tony’s eyes glazed over, body somewhat hunched over a stack of pillows. “Worth it,” he chuckled, before he shooed
Steve into the bathroom.

It was with a heavy heart that Steve headed to the canteen alone. Yet as Tony now approaches his table and sits opposite him, Steve wants to rip his heart out of his chest and chuck it at Tony’s face. Maybe that would wipe off that ridiculous smirk he still has the gall to wear.

“What? Something I said?”

Steve shakes his head, the lines on his face hardening. “Unbelievable.”

“Homophobia has no place in this century, Steve. I thought you’d watched enough news to know that by now –”

“It’s not –” He’s raising his voice. He’s not supposed to raise his voice. “It’s fine. For the time being, can we not flaunt the fact that we…” He waves his hand pathetically over his paper napkin, before letting it fall onto his lap like a limp thread.

“… Was it a mistake? Did you regret it?”

“No, I don’t. Is this one of your casual flings that you often brag about –”

“I do not brag about my nights – and why are you making this personal?”

“This is fucking personal!” Steve hisses, and his glass of water tremble with the ferocity of their not-so-surreptitious discussion. All adjacent heads curiously turn around when Steve checks his surroundings. He resigns to leaning back against his chair and trading venomous glares with Tony. “We’ll have to talk about this. Later,” he adds with emphasis, when Tony looks ready to roll out another volley of self-defence. “There’s a meeting with Nick at midnight about dealing with SHIELD and HYDRA. I want you to come with me.”

And Tony’s brows fly high up into his hairline. “That’s honestly the last thing I expect to hear from you.”

“… Why?”
“Insight is my fault, Steve. Agent Killer Moustache over there hasn’t shot me in the head yet because I’m sharing a table with you.”

“Insight is not your fault. None of this is!”

“My weapons. My designs. My fault.”

Steve can’t catch up with Tony sometimes. It’s the multifaceted life and persona that confuses the crap out of him, or maybe it’s the way modern society is. Something Steve can’t get used to, and that’s either a great shame, or a gift. Can’t get used to Tony coming to him quiet and contemplative, perhaps in search of an answer, or guidance – Steve suspects – like right now. His demeanour, earlier fraught with naughty contempt has completely lifted, leaving only a husk of a weary man shouldering the guilt of his life’s works.

Walls. More walls Tony has built to hide behind.

“Insight is going online in eighteen hours,” Steve weighs his words carefully. “The only thing standing between HYDRA and their complete control over seven billion of lives is us. You’re the best person we can count on to disable the fleet.”

“I thrashed my last suit, Steve. I stowed it behind some bush in Tennessee. I’m a liability.”

“You’re Iron Man, aren’t you?” Steve catches Tony’s eyes, his own fierce with pride. “With or without the suit. I need you on the computers. I need you to front a digital attack on SHIELD’s mainframe to take the programme down.”


“… Having the suits will help a great deal, though,” Tony quips, and takes a sip of water from Steve’s mug.

It’s time to take the fight to HYDRA’s doorsteps.
Chapter 44

Five minutes to midnight, they both make their way to Fury’s ward. Shoulder to shoulder, they march forth with their heads held high. When Steve pulls the door open, multiple voices pipe “Stark?” and Tony abruptly falls half a step behind Steve.

… It was going so well.

“Tony is with me on my insistence. You want to win a war against Insight, you need him.”

A youthful Agent evidently believes otherwise. “With due respect, Mr Stark, Project Insight is but a pipedream until your tech comes along.”

“Exactly why we need his expertise, son. Sit down. Nick,” Steve tries appealing to the biggest cheese in the room. “Please.”

This is sadly exactly how he envisions things to happen. He still has his other foot in the hallway outside. Just a word, say “no” and he’s gone. Like dust in the wind. He holds his breath, until Fury’s single eye bore into his very skull…

“Get in here, Stark,” Fury barks, and even Steve jumps a little. “We don’t pay you that many zeros so you can snooze when it matters the most. And what are you Agents standing around for?” He levels a glare as intense as the heat of a thousand suns, and everybody returns their collective asses to their respective chairs. That should put to rest any doubts of just how much gravitas a one-eyed powerhouse can command. Tony, too is feeling the urge to pee.

Maria has with her a tablet – StarkTech, Tony notices – and her mouth twitches when she activates the holographic display. “We have quite a lot on our plate to clear, Agents. Preferably in the next twelve hours. The single most immediate threat is this.” She taps once on the screen, and three majestic Helicarriers float in space. “Insight Helicarriers. Once they reach three thousand feet, they’ll triangulate with Insight satellites becoming fully weaponised.”

“We don’t want to have to reach that stage, Agents,” Fury clarifies, waving around a cannulated hand to make his point. “We can’t say they won’t immediately go to town with those ‘Carriers once they’re online.”
“The ships must not leave the hangar. How do we do that?”

“Tony,” Steve unfolds his arms as he addresses the room. “Zola wrote Insight algorithm from Camp Lehigh. He didn’t mean to launch it from there.”

“Of course not. That would immediately expose HYDRA’s base of operation to the world. Camp Lehigh isn’t SHIELD’s anymore, is it?” The camp is abandoned. Annihilated, last time he checked.

Steve starts pacing the length of Fury’s bed. “The command centre has to be in the Triskelion. Where Alexander Pierce will be, since they’ll need his biometrics for the launch. Where is he scheduled to be at noon tomorrow?”

“The press conference at the foyer.”

“… I’ll be there,” Steve volunteers. Tony is already shooting him an are-you-nuts? glare from across the room. “We take Pierce out, we ground the ships. That’s still cutting it too close. We need to front an attack from within Insight. That’s where Tony comes in.”

“I’m thinking… scrambling the signals between Insight’s control and the Helicarriers. Bounce them off one of Stark satellites instead of Insight’s. Or, I can jam Zola’s algorithm so it doesn’t load.” Tony shakes his head. “But, I don’t understand the syntax. So, scratch that. Uh, you guys like something crazy? I can try reprogramming the ships’ artillery to target each other. Or is that too crazy?”

“We can help, too,” the young Agent’s chair scraps on the floor as he stands. Fury’s men have spunk. “What do you need us to do, Captain?”

“… We meet HYDRA head-on.”

“Sir, what if the Winter Soldier appears?”

And Tony watches Steve curiously, his own shoulders suddenly tense at the sound of the name. Though Steve’s back is against him, he suspects Steve has him in his thoughts. For that alone, he thinks he can make peace with his decision – what he will do to the Soldier should they cross path once more.
“We’ll cross that bridge when we come to it. Do not engage the Soldier upon sighting.” And Steve’s voice falters. “Leave him to us.”

They’re rolling out in four hours. There’s a lot of responsibilities piling on Tony’s shoulders, so he gets to ride with Captain America. Since he can’t – and won’t – risk setting up a flimsy VPN from outside of the Triskelion complex, he needs to be smuggled into preferably, the command room adjacent. How he wishes to have his covert suit in hand. Sure makes the job easier. That suit rocks the retro reflective panels in stealth mode, hell, he could cha-cha right into the command room, hack Insight into smithereens and no one would be the wiser.

“Stay close to me, Tony,” Steve reminds him as he towels his hair dry. They’re back in their private quarter, and Steve’s whole person is damp, fresh out of shower. “After we find you a safe place to work from, I’ll go after Pierce at the conference.”

Tony is sitting cross-legged on the sheet-less mattress, his arms folded tightly across his chest. “You’re not arresting Pierce in front of the press, are you?”

“… Why not?”

“Because you’re still a wanted fugitive? Because, if they open fire on you – and they will – and you fight back – and you will – we’re talking public casualties and a one-way-ticket to life. For you. Oh well, at least you’ll outlive your wardens and fellow lifers. That’ll be fun to watch. I promise to visit.”

“You have a better idea?”

“… We need to make a compelling case for the people to reject SHIELD.”

Steve jams the corner of his towel into the shell of his ear. “No, Tony.”

“The whole institution is corrupt, Steve! We need to tear it down. The people need to know. Stopping Insight today is not going to be enough. We talked about this, and you know it. This is not winning the war. It’s a stopgap. We need to go straight to the heart of the issue.”
“We don’t have evidence.”

“Remember Zola’s presentation? There’s always more from where that comes from. I’ll get us the evidence. We Snowden the crap out of SHIELD.”

Steve is beating around the bush, and Tony gets. Taking out SHIELD is no different from setting up explosives in select corners of a childhood home and watching it implode. “You have a home here with me, Steve,” he blurts out, and inwardly swears when Steve slowly turns to face him again. “With the company. Pepper loves you.”

As fleetingly as the tap of Steve’s heel on the tiled floor, Steve stands suddenly close to Tony. He cocks his chin at an angle, and the scent of cheap shampoo grows stronger. There is a kiss, Tony thinks, as light as the fall of sunlight on his blonde hair on a good summer’s day. It’s over before it begins, and Steve backs away, preferring to rummage through the closet for a fresh change of clothes instead.
Chapter 45

Six a.m. sharp, and Maria drops them off at a bus stop in a discreet black Rover. She winds down her window and nods at them sharply, her idea of best wishes Tony supposes, and promptly drives away. A shuttle bus is supposed to take staffers and guests to the Triskelion at a half an hour interval, and they wait for the first trip. They have grown out their facial hair so much if they would sit on the ground right now, people would toss them change. Their work clothes – dress shirts, slacks and sufficiently polished dress shoes are probably the only reason people haven’t.

“Two incoming, my three o’clock.” Tony mumbles as he pointedly looks away. They’re occupying too much seat space, and he quickly lowers his duffel bag to the ground, between his ankles. “Don’t look like Agents to me.” A lady in her thirties accompanied by her male colleague amble towards them, entrenched in their conversation. As they come closer, Tong freezes up so bad that he doesn’t blink, until Steve’s knuckles brush against his as he scoots closer.

Breathe. Just…

When the coast is clear, Tony whistles lightly and watches the clouds as Steve tasers the pair in their waists. They drop instantly without so much as a “You!”. Steve clicks his tongue. That’s the cue, so Tony leaps to his feet to help Steve drag the bodies into the bushes behind. Crude as it seems, this is premeditated. They’ve come prepared to the gills. Step one, knockout a couple of unfortunate Triskelion employees and steal their IDs. Speedily done, Tony notes as he nicks the lanyard off their necks and passes the woman’s ID to Steve.

Steve pushes it back to him. “You keep the lady’s.”

“Oh, hell no.” Tony tries to loop the lanyard around Steve’s neck anyway. “I’m the one spending the next six hours in the complex! I can’t go around looking like this!”

“Security will be on the lookout for a white male. This is your best cover.”

“Really?” An operation this important and Tony Stark is whining about looking like a chick for one morning. Very mature. “Fine. Give me that. Set the bodies up.”

“They’re still our colleagues, Tony. Be nice.”
Step two, hide said colleagues. Tony whips out four pairs of magnetic cuffs and locks them about their wrists and ankles. A gag goes into their respective mouth next, and for a finishing touch, a full-body spray of nanofiber coating to project the desired holographic display on. A squeeze of these button badges activates it, which Tony now pins to their breast pockets. The bodies vanish into thin air as they take on the appearance of their immediate surroundings. Project Chameleon, ladies and gentlemen. Another lesson from Mother Nature well learned.

“You know, I made these holograph techs because I didn’t like working on screens of finite sizes that I can’t take with me wherever.” He turns the spray bottle on himself and douses his whole head in liquid nanofiber. “With this, we can put visuals up anywhere and anyhow we like them.” He plucks a black button badge from Steve's hand and fixes it to his collar. Sighing softly, he squeezes it, and though he feels absolutely nothing, he knows he’s already wearing the lady’s face. Steve’s bemused expression confirms it. “I don’t mean for this to happen, Steve. I don’t want to make weapons anymore, and I created something worse.”

Steve’s gaze lingers on him for a fleeting second that stretches on, before he looks away and offers nothing. Not the barest of consolation. So, Tony sucks it up because, what is there left to do if not this? Good God, he’s no Miss America dressed up in man clothes, but he doesn’t look that mismatched and off, does he? She’s pretty butch to begin with, anyway.

Steve fixes himself quickly and they soon board the six thirty shuttle bus. Oddly enough, they pass security checks without hassle. No pat downs, no biometrics – all they have to do is to place their ID face down on a scanner and be granted access to possibly all fifty-something floors of the Triskelion complex.

“Wow, of all the things they’d poached from my company, internal security is not one of them.”

Steve’s knuckles graze his again. “Be more ladylike. Don’t walk with your feet apart. Use smaller steps. Do not roll your eyes.”

Tony curtsies and moseys all the way to the staff canteen on the fifth floor without ado. They commandeer a table parked under the Wi Fi router – not that it matters – and Tony gratefully takes the seat that gives him a near panoramic view of the canteen. He sets up his laptop quickly enough while Steve checks for cameras – a forty-degree shift of his device to the right does the trick nicely.

Step three is to keep a lookout for the window of action.

“There’s a public briefing and viewing session from the deck at ten,” Steve raps under his breath, and Tony stops tapping on his keyboard. “The press and guests of honour will stay there for the
launching. That’s twelve. Lunch will be served at twelve-thirty.”

“The best time for me to gate-crash the party is right before they pop the champagne. Eleven, eleven-thirty?”

“That’s half-an-hour grace, max. Can you make it?”

And Tony smirks, “Five bucks say I’ll make it.”
Chapter 46

Timing is of absolute importance. Hit Insight too soon, HYDRA gets a head start in proofing the mainframe and flushing out intruders. Hit it too late, that’s game over. Rosebud. His hands are tied until the clock says eleven-thirty, so until then, he’s pre-empting. He’s laying out all the possible codes, all possible permutations of offense and defense to bring Insight and SHIELD to a complete digital meltdown. God, he’s been wanting to show SHIELD up for ages, and now Fury is ordering him to do exactly that?

A nerdy wet dream comes true.

“What are you going to do?” Tony asks and his philtrum itches and he wants to scratch it, but if the nanofiber coating comes off, his moustache will show on his lady-face, and since the circus isn’t in town...

“If I can have my way, I’d like to sabotage the Helicarrier’s circuits. But, I’m not cleared for Insight’s hangar.”

“Yeah? I can fix that.”

“No, don’t. This tag I’m borrowing isn’t cleared for it. Steve Rogers isn’t cleared either, and I was ‘Employee of the Month’ then. Either way, if you clear me –”

“Warning bell goes off. Gotcha. Were you really ‘Employee of the Month’?”

“SHIELD bases are many and scattered across the country. We can’t be everywhere in the next four hours. I’m rendezvousing with the others in,” Steve checks his watch, “fifteen. Try to reach out to all field Agents from here via internal channels, and circulate evidence of HYDRA’s invasion you’ll be providing Maria. The truth will speak for itself.”

“So, that’s the grand plan? A public speech about HYDRA invading SHIELD, and hope people will listen?”

“What choice do we have left but to trust the good men and women in SHIELD’s service?”
They’re screwed.

“Take this.” Steve presses a set of earpieces into Tony’s palm. They bear SHIELD’s emblem, and Tony scoffs at it. “What if this is routed to HQ? Is it safe?”

“It’s the best we got. The engineers tweaked the frequency. If you see Agents coming for you, you run.”

“Mm. Good thinking.”

And this is where Steve leaves him, so they could all go back to doing the heroic thing, the right thing. The right thing and the easy thing is never the same thing, which is why Tony is eyefucking that fancy-schmancy tall flute of black coffee on the menu. If death or imprisonment were to come for him – and he bet all his lofty-but-still-frozen bank accounts that swiftly they will – he wants to go out high on caffeine. As discreetly as Steve can manage, he closes a hand over Tony’s. Briefly but emphatically, because he has this to say, “A heartbeat is long enough to make the right call.”

When Steve finally leaves, Tony – in the company of himself – shakes his head. Even at times like this Steve is still lecturing everyone.

Tony stuffs his right ear with the earpiece and starts it. No chatter yet, so nobody’s active on the line, which is perfectly fine. It’s still too early for shit to go down. Two minutes of inactivity and already he’s itching to cartwheel across the canteen and juggle empty paper cups. “Hey, Steve?” He pretends to cough into his sleeves, and shirks his shoulder to jam the earpiece deeper into his ear. “You copy?”

Something crackles on the other side, and sure enough, Steve – annoyed – replies, “You’re not supposed to be talking to yourself, Tony. It’s suspicious behaviour.”

“I’m talking to you.”

“Same difference!”

“Listen, I have a crawler I want to let go. I can use it to index SHIELD’s databases, even make copies of them for our own perusal later. I don’t mean to brag, but I’ve the best optimised crawling strategy and architecture for a hit-and-run. I uh,” he flips the ID hanging from his lanyard and
squints, “the lady’s ID says she’s in Accounting, Jesus Christ. You don’t think accountants do database indexing and archiving, do they?”

“Tony, how risky is this?”

“Very. But!” Even his back straightens up. “SHIELD isn’t going to expect this. Crawlers typically take months to do their job. Their cyber guard dogs will be looking for malicious ware, not this. Let me do this. It’s strategic to have a bird eye view of the enemy, Steve.”

This is doing the right thing. The right thing and the easy thing are never the same thing.

“Affirmative. Be careful.”

Tipping the corner of his laptop so the screen is further hidden from prying eyes, Tony labours on his keyboard. Too bad he doesn’t carry change in his pocket, the staff over there just reloaded their coffee grinder. What he wouldn’t give…

“Uh oh.” He taps his ear piece, just in case.

“I’m here. What is it?”

“Zola’s algorithms are online.”

“… That can’t be right. The Helicarriers are still here –”

“The ships are not online, not yet weaponised but the target list has been compiled. And it’s still being updated.”

“How many?” The edge in Steve’s voice is palpable.

“… Almost a million. I’m downloading this, then I’m pulling out. They’ll catch me watching if they’re still working on this.”
“We need to warn these people.”

“How?” Tony disables internet access altogether on his laptop, and begins to pour over his data. “This is a name list, Steve, and it doesn’t tell us their current whereabouts. By the time we know that, it would’ve meant successful synchronisation between the Helicarriers and Insight satellites. We can’t win this one, Steve.”

“Tell me who’s top on the list.”

“… The Mandarin, huh. And what I imagine every follower in his faction. Oh, son of a bitch.”

It suddenly becomes clear why SHIELD has taken nil interest in the Mandarin so far, despite their – dare he say – exaggerated coverage on national airwaves. So much hype, yet so little action… because SHIELD – HYDRA – has been bidding their time. They’ll want to strike when fear has seeped deep enough into the community. And with fear, comes acceptance and gratitude when a saviour shows up at the nick of time. HYDRA means to play that role. Be the planet’s knight in a shining armour.

“It doesn’t stop there, Steve.” Tony scrolls further down, his brows knitting even closer. “More than half of the Senate members are here. Uh, Christ. Me, too.”

“Come again?”

“Me. Says here ‘Anthony E. Stark’. I’m on the list. Your name is here, too. And probably everyone else’s in Fury’s hideout.”
“Guess we have all the incentives we need to keep the Helicarriers grounded, haven’t we?”

“I’m not laughing, Steve!”

“It’s nine oh five. I know it’s hard, but don’t engage Insight. Not yet.”

Tony’s thinking on the line of evacuating as many of these people – but that can’t work, can it, because there’s no magical place on this planet that can withstand the brunt of those Helicarriers’ guns. The next best thing would be to quarantine Insight’s targets, if only to keep collaterals to the minimum. He knows those weapons. Shot from twenty thousand feet, no way the bullets won’t go astray. Insight doesn’t only target a person. It goes possibly for a twelve-yard radius, at best.

“I don’t even know where these people are,” Tony bites out bitterly. “I have names, but not coordinates or e-mail addresses or phone numbers! Not until Insight goes online and engages the Maps or social media, there’s no way to tell. By the time we could, it would’ve been too late.”

“Stay focus, Tony. The guests-of-honour and the press will arrive in one hour. We need proof of HYDRA’s footprint in SHIELD by then. Get cracking.”

The comm goes silent and Tony exhaled a long one. Steve’s tone of dismissal doesn’t hurt as much as it should, but it serves its purpose well. Tony clears his throat and resumes typing furiously on his keyboard, a new purpose burning in his mind, when a shadow looms behind him that he slams the monitor down so hard the table quakes under the force.

Jesus.

“I didn’t mean to startle you, Anna.”

Who the fuck is Anna –

“Oh,” and both his and the newcomer’s eyebrows fly so high up that they disappear into their respective hairlines. All the nanofiber coating does is give him a neat lady appearance. “Um,” he tries
again, raising his pitch by an octave and running a finger along his collar. “Hey, there. I’m fine, I’m just… working.” Good God, he sounds like a Tellytubby.

“You? Really? Wow. I should be on the lookout for pigs with wings anytime now…”

“Look, Mister –” he peers at the man’s staff ID, “Smith. I’m working, so I’ll appreciate you sashay your ass up to Tech Support and leave me to my… balance sheets. I’ve a dateline, thank you.”

“… We spoke about this, Anna. It’ll be fine. We don’t have to pretend after the transfer. The folks in Tech Support are super cool, they won’t talk.”

And Tony has no idea what he’s supposed to do with that information. He does freeze up when Mr Smith stoops to place a quick peck on the side of his lips.

“I can pick the kids up at four. There’ll be meatballs ready when you come home.”

Tony can only blink stupidly, and nods.

“I’ll see you soon, honey!”

It takes Tony a full minute to shake himself out of the weirdass situation, and two prompt lines later, his earpiece crackles as Steve speak again. “You alright there?”

“Yeah. Did you hear everything?”

“… I heard enough.”

“We just knocked his wife out cold in the wee morning, stowed her in some bush and I just lied to his face. I hope they get their meatballs to go because the Smiths are spending the next couple of days in Anna’s observatory ward. What are we doing, Steve?”

“Don’t go down that road. It doesn’t lead us anywhere.”
Now having a conscience is inconvenient? The art of superhero-ing is so messed up. “I’m ready to download SHIELD database in parallel batches. Where do you want me to dump them?”

“Where will it be most accessible by the public?”

That’s easy – the same pool that Insight drags for information. “The World Wide Web.”

“Do it.”

“You can’t undo this once it’s out there, Steve. It’s a one-way –”

“— ticket, I know. And that’s good. Then, nobody can manipulate the truth and pull wool over the people’s eyes.”

But, that’s not what Tony meant. If the databases go online, there won’t be a SHIELD to have. Ever. An international committee will be formed to ensure a repeat of such corruption to the highest levels of global security task force will never occur.

The clock says it’s ten sharp.

“OK,” Tony hits the ‘Enter’ key. “Done deal. I’m uploading to the Net.”

And he’s uploading them direct from SHIELD’s mainframe. Somebody’s bound to catch him red-handed, if somebody’s looking. And somebody’s always looking.

“How long will it take?”

“A while. There’s a lot of data dumping here.”

“Stay safe, Tony.”
His cyber trail is a freaking yellow brick road when he keeps the route open like this. He works his mojo, tries to deflect all indications that would no doubt point to him and his computer occupying this very spot. He’s already cycling through shell accounts like Steve does his punching bags.

“I have a bad feeling about this, Steve.”

“They found you?”

“Not yet. I should’ve been.”

“How much longer?”

“Ten minutes, give or take.”

“Can you move to a less visible spot? Stay there until the upload is completed?”

Tony looks around with mild panic dressed up as curiosity for the snacks bar. “If I move, I can’t work on the computer, and that means I can’t defend the line, leaving myself open to detection.”

“… I’m sending backup.”

Stay and die, or hide and die. “Seven minutes to go. I’m staying, Steve. I need to see this through with my own eyeballs. Are you in position?” Seven minutes to giving the world the dirt on HYDRA.

“I’m here. Ready when you are, Tony.”

At that exact moment, a quartet of Agents – fully geared and totting MK5 – breaks past the canteen’s perimeter and scouts the surrounding. Tony instinctively shields his brows with his hand, and grows a sudden interest for the Calathea. Cocking his head to the right, his earpiece digging deeper, he whispers, “They’re onto me, Steve.”
How he wished he’d ordered that fancy-schmancy tall flute of black coffee after all, if only to have something his nervous fingers to fiddle with. His heart does a somersault when the Agents look his way, and he wrinkles his nose. Stay normal, act normal – and God, why are they looking here so long? What’s so jarring about a normal-looking lady sitting in a discreet corner of the staff canteen, by herself, without coffee or snacks on her table, her laptop closed before her as she stares at air molecule?

Oh God, he’s doomed.

He calmly packs his laptop into his bag, fully ignoring the intensity of four pair of eyes glued onto him. Then, he steps away from his corner, and makes a beeline for the other exit that the Agents did not just come through.

“Are you clear, Tony?”

Making sure his mouth doesn’t move as much, he mutters under his breath, “Very, not clear.”

“Exit the canteen. Take the stairs down two floors. Turn right, and the second door on your right will take you to the staff gym. Use your staff ID to access it. That should throw them off your trail.”

He saunters out of the canteen as femininely as he can manage, makes damn sure he doesn’t walk with his feet apart like he has a dick swinging between his thighs. He follows Steve’s directions and end up in front of the door Steve indicated, and feels like his poop is holding up after all when he sees no signs of those pesky Agents in his vicinity. Lifting his staff card to the scan pad mounted on the wall, he almost wants to smirk when –

“Anna!”

God dammit.

“OK, hey.” One of the quartet of Agents just positively catapults through the fire escape, holding up a sad paper cup of coffee. Most of said coffee seems to be soaking up the cuff of his sleeve anyway, and forming a steady pool on the tiled floor. “Oh shucks.”
Tony freezes where he stands, one arm still raised in the air.

“Thank God I caught you. Uh, this is for you.” Agent hands over that cup of coffee, and Tony takes it wordlessly. What is in-character for him to do? Drink it with gratitude? Splash the residual content over the Agent’s sorry face? “I wanna thank you for what you did with the… uh. You know. For working your magic on my account.”

Oh? This is what it’s about? Naughty, naughty, Anna Smith. So, Tony toasts his drink in mocked acknowledgement, and keeps his trap shut. His squeaky Teletubby voice will only do him a disservice.

“OK, nicely played, Anna.” Good. Roll away, Agent. “I'll see ya around.”

Tony bins the coffee the soonest he can.

“… Is he gone?”

“Yeah.”

“Are you OK?”

“… I just lost two years off my lifespan.” Which reminds him. “It’s ten fifteen. Give me five minutes. HYDRA files will be making waves on the Net, and you can go to town with them.”

“OK. On your cue, Tony.”

He finally beeps into the gym without incident, and goes through another door on his right into the unisex changing room. A quick eyeballing tells him there are no cameras installed – not visible ones at least – and promptly occupies the bench closest to the door. The uploading was interrupted courtesy of Mr Husband, and he’s lost precious minutes just dealing with Anna’s admittedly weirdass acquaintances. All things considered, things have gone quite swimmingly for him, and he sure hopes the same can be said on Steve’s side.
The buffering bar on his screen flashes green.

“You’re good to go, Steve.”

And what the hell, the speakers right above his head rattle with some form of static disturbances, before Steve’s voice blares through them. “Attention, all SHIELD agents. This is Steve Rogers. You’ve heard a lot about me over the last few days, some of you were even ordered to hunt me down. But I think it’s time you know the truth.”

A complex-wide broadcast of the truth? Tony quickly logs onto the Internet, and finds HYDRA-slash-SHIELD on Google’s front page. He’s imagining this whole thing going down differently, more of Steve clocking Pierce a good one in the chin – like he did Hitler in the comics – so he’s free to make his statement-of-the-century before hundreds of reporters, their cameras flashing away.

“SHIELD is not what we thought it was. It’s been taken over by HYDRA. Alexander Pierce is their leader.” Don’t sugarcoat it for them. “The STRIKE and Insight crew are HYDRA as well. I don’t know how many more, but I know they’re in the building. They could be standing right next to you.” Tony curbs the sudden urge to look over his shoulder, even if he’s sitting flushed against the wall. “They almost have what they want: absolute control. They shot Nick Fury and it won’t end there. If you launch those Helicarriers today, HYDRA will be able to kill anyone that stands in their way, unless we stop them.” A sigh steals a moment, but Steve presses on, “I know I’m asking a lot, but the price of freedom is high. It always has been, and it’s a price I’m willing to pay. And if I’m the only one, then so be it. But I’m willing to be I’m not.”

Tony would’ve given Steve’s PSA a standing ovation, when the door slams open and bounces against the walls, an army of SHIELD Agents barricading his escape. Tony has never stared down so many gun barrels at one ago, and this is after Afghanistan.

“Hands where I can see them!”

The truth is already out there. A sly smirk plays on his lips, and his body lights up in flames.
May the best cowboy win.

Tony dives for cover behind a stack of changing locker, pelting fireballs in his wake. He hears screams, and he’s suddenly sorry that he can’t control the temperature of his fires, only the size, and he sure isn’t kid-gloving with candlelight. He hears no retaliatory gun shots, so he musters a larger fireball, screams “Incoming!” at the top of his lung, and bowls it through the door. He’s polite like that.

He also spies a second exit from the changing room, and bails.

“Fire at will!”

Jesus Christ. The fire escape before him echoes with heavy footsteps, and shadows creep from either side of the hallway. He’s run out of options. “Steve?” he barks into his comm device, and takes stock of the short landing he has between here and the floor-to-ceiling window. “I’m gonna do something really, really stupid.”

“Tony –”

“See you on the other side!”

He cannonballs through the glass panes, defenestration be damned. Extremis is already mending the punctures in his flesh. It’s a meagre three-storey drop onto the balcony, nothing he can’t handle. And God, for a fucking minute he thinks he’s due for a meeting with his maker. He blinks the stardust from his vision, and slowly, reality spins into something more solid – as solid as the tarmac cushioning his battered body. He’s on fire again, pain and him as one.

“Tony!” Steve bellows into his ear canal. “Tony, do you copy!”

He groans, which is English for yes, he copies.

“The Helicarriers are taking off!”
“What?”

“Get back to your computer and jam the signals! They’re readying the launching pads! I’m on my way to the hangar!”

Wait, wait, wait a hot minute! How can the Helicarriers be launched when Alexander Pierce, that motherfudger is there in cuffs? Tony rolls to his side, gasping to re-inflate his lungs with sweet air. He sees Pierce right there, surrounded by Fury’s men – he recognises those people, even amidst the cloud of agony of bones and ligaments cracking into their rightful places. They won! They’d vanquished the big bad –

“Tony!”

And it’s abruptly radio silence on Steve’s side. No matter how hard he taps on the black plastic wedged in his ear, it won’t come alive, won’t crackle the slightest. The line has gone cold. “Steve?” The hangar, he said?

If that HYDRA SOB has somehow activated Insight before the designated hour, then a hard reboot on Insight’s system ought to do the trick. Steve is heading for the hangar. He should, too. He should… be ripping out wires and taking apart engines –

Two’s a company, and three’s a crowd, right?

He leaps to his feet and bounds towards the hangar, of which he has no idea where. He stops and looks around in frantic, and is pretty sure regardless that he should be heading for that circular building, its domelike rooftop already splitting into quarters. And a bullet catches him in his flank. It’s painful enough to bring tears to his eyes. He’s defenceless, a sitting duck for the slaughter.

“Stark, get away!”

The prattle of a Gatling gun is suddenly deafening, and from the tail of his eye, he glimpses upon Maria Hill in a truck, making her well-timed appearance like a big damned hero. He salutes her gratefully, and ignores how she’s eyeing the gunshot wound in his side. He’ll heal in time, and time is not on their side. So he runs again, picks up his speed and hopes the other side doesn’t have snipers aiming for his head as he makes a mad, suicidal dash across an open bay. He needs to get online. Make a call.
The guardhouse looks promising.

Iron Man’s MO has always been I-break-it-I-buy-it, meaning, every single thing that he breaks in the process of superhero-ing, he makes sure damages are billed back to Stark Industries. He’s careful with his business, because he’s not made of money – he would be if he’d stopped thrashing things and raking up collaterals. But fuck this time.

Tony takes a sharp turn and sets the security barrier on fire. “Fire in the hole!” Get out, get out, get out –

He’s lucky to have to deal with only one overweight, probably just done napping security personnel manning the booth. Tony almost pities him for having to launch another half-assed fireball his way as the man moves a shaking hand to his holsters. “Just do us a favour, Sir, and run!”

And run away he does.

Tony kicks down the door and commandeers the atrocity that is Pentium Four sitting on the counter and sends out his Bat signal equivalent. He’s knocking his forehead against the doorframe as every second trickles away, when he hears the tell-tale ping! of Christmas arriving early.

Thirty Iron Man suits heeding his call, that’s what. They’re all homing to the pre-set coordinates – here. All of them, even the odd one that, for some reasons, is stranded in Timbuktu. Some seven suits of armour are closer by, and will arrive in under fifteen minutes. He hopes he has fifteen to spare.

Mark XVII has been monitoring the US airspace, and radar tells him that he could’ve seen a speck of red and gold in the sky, if he were to poke his head out of the little side window.

“Come to Papa!”

The scowling helmet is accelerating for him. He stretches his arms and keeps his feet apart, welcoming the brace of metal on his body. The faceplate lifts and his grin widens, before gold titanium alloy wraps snugly around his head and the OS recalibrates itself to return control to its rightful owner.
“It’s good to be back!” Two more have just crossed the norther borders. As for him? “Initiate House Party Protocol.”
Chapter 50

Tony solemnly swears that he is up to no good. That he will not hold back, and he will do his
damnest best to bring those Helicarriers down. Amen to the God of everything mechanical. He zips
upward like a rocket and tanks all the G’s that would’ve mushed his eyeballs, if he didn’t have
Extremis. His nose does bleed, and copper trickles down his throat – minor issues. Still a win.

“Go, go, go!”

At two thousand feet, all three Helicarriers will triangulate with each other, and sync with Insight
satellites. It’ll be Armageddon, HYDRA style. Not while he can help it.

“Tank missiles!”

He’s eyeballing it. No way his shot will go wide, even a Stormtrooper can’t miss a ship that gigantic!
But it’s tough. Kudos to SHIELD engineers and mechanics. He seethes as he watches the hull
brushes off attacks like pelted eggs. “That does it. JARVIS? Please tell me you’re here, buddy. I’d
like to run all the calculations myself, but I don’t have X-ray eyes, so I need you –”

“If you are indeed, Anthony E. Stark as claimed, tell me your favourite colour.”

“Oh, God. Kill me.” His fault. He went full-on paranoid on security before he dispersed his suits
around the world. With fair reasons, of course – what would he do if some random schmuck chance
upon one and activated a blueprint of a Chitauri-powered super-taser by mistake? “Don’t be a
smartass, J. Check my biometrics!” And, he’s annoyed the Helicarriers enough that they’re mounting
a counterattack. Something that looks lethal just missed his head by an inch and he swerves away,
taking cover in the vortex trails left by the ship’s exhaust. “Would you scan this ship for weak points
or not?”

“Once you tell me your favourite colour, I will, Sir.”

“Red, white and fucking blue, OK? Get on with it!”

“Welcome back, Sir. It’s my greatest pleasure to continue working with you.”
In fact…

Tony readies his repulsor in his gauntlets, and charges them to full blast.

“Sir? Simulations haven’t decided if –”

“I think I’ve weaned off my dependency on simulations somewhat. Six percent to the gauntlets, J!”

“As you wish.”

He’d think the douchebags that keep stealing his works and turning them against him would’ve wizened up by now. His doodles, his designs, his engines, his ship. “You’re mine.” The exhaust must’ve been linked to the reactor core where power is generated. So, Tony lets go, and his body is thrown backward with the force of his attack.

“Sir, I detect an anomalous spike in heat generation and conduction on the underside of the construction –”

“Get us out!”

They barely make it out in one piece. The blast throws him off his feet that he cartwheels across the length of the Potomac below him, before slamming into one of the Triskelion wings and bowled through three layers of walls.

“… I feel like throwing up.”

The faceplate lifts automatically, so Tony used that opportunity to smack his forehead with his metal palm and bite back a stream of creative, choice words directed at everything that’s wrong with his life. One Helicarrier down, two to go. Theoretically, the loss of one should’ve been enough to derail Insight, shouldn’t it? Even as Tony looked up in the sky, metal debris raining on him, the remaining two are still resolutely making their ascent into the clouds, and he can’t risk it.

He shoots back up to the second ship adjacent and gives it his best. As he reclaims his place in the line of spitting exhausts, stabilises flight amidst vortices as sweltering as three thousand and two
hundred Centigrade, Tony sees now – as clear as ever – the price tag slapped on freedom. It’s hellfire and brimstone and heart-stilling fear for failure. His stabiliser is overworked, and the heat seeps through gold titanium alloy that Tony gnashes his teeth so hard because he won’t acknowledge certainties of defeat, or mortality. He’s gonna die, having achieved nothing. But, he’s fucking trying, and he’s not giving up, and just like that, despite a flickering HUD and cracking shell of his Iron Man suit, his surmounting fear… vanishes.

It’s a price he is willing to pay. And he’s ready.

Out of the corner of his eyes, Mark III and IV form rank and flank him mid-air. Boy, he’s never felt so much joy working with two of his most obsolete models. More are coming.

“Take ‘em to church!”

He rolls sharply away as Mark III replaces him in the hotspot, and resumes barraging the shaft with repulsors. Tony’s suit can’t take anymore punishment. His boots are close to being just boots.

“Sir!”

“Shit –”

The second time he’s sent cartwheeling through the sky, his flight command goes off for good, and he’s a certified dead stick shooting for the ground. His death-defying screams have nothing on the chaotic rush of air that his body is tearing through. He pulls the lever that’s pressing against his thigh, activating the manual release protocol. His suit folds by the seam and –

“Fucking –”

He sees the green patch of a field growing vivid as he surrenders to gravity, and a splash of brain matter on soil. Here lies Anthony Stark, who was once brave to stand up for what’s right –

A metallic grey – through and through, so Mark XIII? – freefalls behind him, and its latches work to admit his body into the suit’s belly. It’s not over – not until the system goes online upon recognition of his biometrics and honest to God, if JARVIS asks once more for his favourite colour he will deploy that parachute –
“Sir?”

“Red, white and blue!”

“… Regardless, I would advise against using the suits as collaterals in your unwavering objective of destroying Insight Helicarriers.”

“Why the hell not?” There’s still one more to blow to kingdom come. “We have to get back there! Get ready the other suits!”

“Each suit carries a sole copy of decades’ worth of your work, Sir. We have lost Project Tomorrow and Manhattan. The crude blueprints of Arsenal are stored in the suit you have just reprogrammed to explode upon contact with the northeast hull of the third Helicarrier. I remind you –”

“I know, J.” His life’s work, basically – his blood and sweat in every fibre of the Iron Man suits, and he’s personally escorting them to the gates of annihilation. “Just do what I say.”
They go off like fireworks. The most spectacular he’d ever seen. He’s liberated, despite the *boom! boom! One after another. One sleepless week. Boom! One all-nighter on a Christmas. Boom!*

“It’s going down, J. It’s going down!”

Where’s Steve in all this? Steve, Maria, Fury if he’s able – rejoice! Insight is –

“Sir, a three-tonne support beam is breaking off from the hull. Trajectory projection indicates a straight dive into the National Mall. Civilians evacuation is still in progress.”

He’s got to be blind to have missed the beam. He straightens his arms and jets towards it. “Those people won’t make it. We have to clear a path. How many more I should be worried about?”

“… Just the one, Sir.”

“You sure?” He looks around, not understanding how millions of shards falling from the sky can all fall into the Potomac like God Himself has scripted this, and miss *every* unsuspecting being and buildings.

“Yes, Sir. Captain Rogers has mobilised all personnel available on the grounds to aid evacuation.”

“Where is he?”

“… His last known position is Insight’s hangar.”

“That was a million lightyears ago! *Where is he now?”*

“I don’t know, Sir.”
This suit is a bit too lightweight for lifting a three-tonne mass. Still, he slips under it, right around the middle and flattens both palms against the surface. “Give me all you got, J. Up!”

The propulsion in his boots almost rips his legs from his hip. He’s feeling the tell-tale heat again, a sign that Extremis has been activated. He’s injured somewhere, and it does hurt, acutely. The best form of anaesthesia is just worrying about civilian death toll upon impact, should he fail.

The margin of clearance depreciates. The upward thrust of Iron Man alone isn’t working.

“I’m blasting this apart,” he gasped, and his overworked chest reactor whines in protests. “Warn me if I miss any chunks.”

“Sir, not advisable! The suit is already running on reserves!”

The Unibeam shoots true, and the beam halves as Tony darts through in between. He spins around and rights himself, his mortal self jostling against the sweaty lining of his suit. He’s all maxed out. The piece of concrete better be the last of evil reincarnate. “Just run ‘em dry, J. Where are my other suits?”

“… Not suitable for human piloting, Sir.”

But still. What a way to go down.

“Sir, I detect heat signatures on the bay of the Potomac. Two individuals, both male. One is severely injured, his core temperature is dropping fast.”

“Can you alert the paramedics?”

“… Sir, I suspect he’s Captain Rogers. I can’t identify his company from this distance.”

“But, I can’t –”

He can’t leave. The thumping of his heart in his ear – the gush of blood accompanying it drowns the
cacophony of him making confetti out of the Helicarrier’s falling carcass. He screams as he labours in the sky, saving lives, one after another as he neutralises debris. He wishes so bad to not give a fuck and make his way to Steve, to save him.

“J, Unibeam.”

“Sir, we are on reserves!”

“I don’t want to hear it! Blast it!”

His HUD flashes red as his chest piece emits one last shot of bright blue light. Something shatters into sprinkles of metal and concrete, and Tony doesn’t waste anymore seconds. He makes a sharp curve mid-flight when his suit dips rapidly against the scream that just died in his throat. He’s losing altitude.

“JARVIS!”

“I am sorry, Sir. We don’t have enough power to sustain flight. Brace for impact.”

“No, no – don’t do this!”

A message pops up in his HUD, front and centre and it says flap deployed. And then it’s the summer breeze in his face, a telling splash immediately after, before the cool, dark depth of the Potomoc claims him. Despite initial velocity, he hits the water softly. He’s still in one piece. Just him alone. Having absorbed all the damages, his suit – now a useless shell – is lifeless as it sinks to the bottom of the river.

That’s the last one of a legion.

Tony starts swimming. It’s one broad stroke of his arm after another, relentless, towards where Steve was last caught on JARVIS’ radar.

And he sees them. He swims harder. He sees them, and a chill run down his spin when he recognises Steve’s company.
“Get away from him!”

He’s swallowing saltwater as he yells at James Barnes. He keeps at it. He’s so fucking close! Not this time, not when he can help it, and certainly not under his watch. Aren’t his parents enough? How many more must Barnes massacre? Stupid, stupid Steve is still on his back, dead to the world. He doesn’t care that the Winter fucking Soldier is looming over him. One choke of Steve’s neck, one jerk – that’s all it takes.

“Leave him alone!”

Barnes falls to his knees, and he bows over Steve. Their noses are almost touching, and Tony stops swimming against the current. He raises a fist above the water surface, and squeezes out his last ounce of strength. Whatever he can get out of Extremis – a flaming cannonball, a firecracker, a cluster of hot steam – he wills into existence.

Then, Barnes seals his lips over Steve’s.

Barnes pushes his palms against Steve’s ribcages, and Tony counts one, two, three. Another breath of lifegiving air. One, two, three. It’s a dance with the dead, to bring Steve back to life. Tony watches, enthralled, lost in grief, and even when Steve sputters and stirs, Tony is still adrift in the Potomac. Until Barnes cocks his head towards him, across the distance and just stares – Tony’s resolve solidifies. But, he doesn’t ready his fist. He swims, and Barnes trudges into the bushes.

Lost.

It’s over.
Chapter 52

Tony yawns so widely tears prickle at the brim of his eyes, and he stretches in his stupidly tiny plastic chair like a rubber band pulled taut. He stubs his toe against the bedframe – again – and is tired enough that he cans it and not complain to Steve. Like Steve could answer him anyway. Look at him, so sound asleep, oblivious to the goings of the world. Time waits no man, not even Steve Rogers, and time has forgotten about him for all of seventy years.

“Wake up, Steve,” Tony murmurs as he pops his knuckles. He’s been calling out to Steve on and off for the past… three days? It’s been three days since they wheeled Steve out of ICU and stuck him in a standard class A ward. Single bed, six-paned windows on the eastern wall, enough space to fit a small team of medical staff, a comatose super-soldier and a bone-deep weary billionaire-genius-whatever. “Want to watch some TV, hmm?”

Not waiting for a reply – not expecting one – he turns the TV on, leans back in his chair and stifles another bout of yawn.

“Do you solemnly swear to tell the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth?”

“I do.”

That again? They’ve been airing the same shit on national TV the past three days! He’ll even go as far as saying it’s the only thing on every dang time he turns on the TV.

“Why haven’t we yet heard from Captain Rogers?”

Because he’s still lying in some sterilised foam bed with bars on the sides to keep him in place, with tubes snaking out of his wrists delivering drugs and whatnot, hooked to a heart monitor because it almost gave out on him not half a week ago? Tony understands the gravity of the situation. He’s not mocking the government, the press, the people’s anxiety because they all have the right to information. And information is what Steve has. What Tony has. So, he testifies before this special committee hastily put together to quell public unrest because let’s face it, HYDRA secretly wearing SHIELD to the prom? Steve is right. The people have to know.

“I don’t know what’s left for him to say. I think the rock in the middle of the Potomac made his point fairly eloquently.”
“Well, he could explain how this country is expected to maintain its national security now that he and you have laid waste to our intelligence apparatus.”

“HYDRA was selling you lies, not intelligence.”

“Mr Stark, need we remind you that you too, are in some ways accountable for Project Insight? We reserve the right to sanction a second committee to scrutinise your complicity with HYDRA’s activities, but of relevance to today’s agenda, I must remind you, some on this committee feel that you belong in a penitentiary, not mouthing off on Capitol Hill.”

It’s not a good year for Stark Industries without the government or NGOs threatening to either sue his pants off or throw him into jail. He admits, when General Scudder-what’s-his-face gave him an ultimatum, he nearly wets his pants.

“You’re not gonna put me in a prison. You’re not gonna put Steve Rogers in a prison. You know why?”

“Do enlighten us.”

“Because you need us. Yes, the world is a vulnerable place, and yes, we helped made it that way. But we’re also the ones best qualified to defend it. So, if you want to arrest me, arrest me. You know where to find me.”

It has been a riot in front of Stark Tower since the hearing goes online. People camped on the curb holding placards, trying to catch a sight of Iron Man. They don’t know he’s all holed up in Sibley Memorial Hospital and has no intention whatsoever to rematerialize out there, not when the crazies are everywhere. Which explains his docility, right? Zero complaints since the day he checked into a ward.

But, somebody’s got to deal with the shitstorm.

“Anthony Edward Stark!”

Tony doesn’t hear the door open, or the clacks of classy work pumps on bleached tiles. He must’ve dozed off, and for a split second he thinks he’s dreaming of Pepper, oh, beautiful Pepper… her sweet-smelling strawberry blonde hair tied up in a ponytail, always looking at him with such worry
in her face… it’s making the wrinkles worse…

“I don’t know what to do with you, honestly!”

She’s real. She’s very corporeal. She’s clawing at his biceps like a mad hamster and he stills her by her wrists. “Pepper, stop it –”

“I swear to God, one day I’m going to kill you myself –”

“I’m sorry. I’m so, so sorry for not calling –”

“You think I care that you don’t call?”

“Yes?”

“... I need to punch something real bad.”

“Pep, please. I know I had been such an idiot –”

“Had been?”

“… Still am. If you want to take a swing at me, please avoid the right side of my face? I dislocated my jaw that one time.”

And Pepper bursts into tears. She falls forward into his chest, and sob wetly into his shirt. There is a special place in hell for people who make Pepper Potts cry, and he sincerely believes his season pass is ready for collection. He pats her on her back, and she bawls even louder. If she’s going to make a ruckus, he hopes she goes all out.

Maybe then Steve will wake up.
“OK, uh. Tissue. You want to blow your nose, Pep?”

She slaps him meekly around the arm and pulls away. He misses her warmth already, but lets her withdraw into the plastic chair he’s been occupying since the beginning of time.

“How is Steve?” She slips her petite hand between the railings to grasp Steve’s limp one. She squeezes, and Tony looks away. He does that every other hour too, if only to assure himself that Steve hasn’t accidentally passed in his sleep.

Tony’s lips pursed, and he shakes his head. “Still the same. Hasn’t woken up. The doctor says anytime now, but.” Shockingly enough, the super-soldier serum doesn’t grant Steve invincibility. He was inches away from death when Tony finally reached him. He picked up where Barnes left. Kept up with the CPR until the ambulance found them on the muddy bank of the Potomac. Tony had never been more afraid of death in that instance. Afghanistan, Obadiah Stane, the palladium poisoning… they had nothing on losing Steve.

“Hey, Pep… I’ve been thinking. Is there anything we can do about SHIELD?”

“They’re not a tech company on the verge of bankruptcy given current circumstances. Still, the agency is undergoing liquidation of some sort…”

“We’ll want to heighten security level after this, won’t we?” His eyes twinkle, and so do hers as she catches on to his intentions.

“The job ads are about to go online, but we can hold them back and conduct private interviews with whoever you have in mind. I’ll expect the list ready on my table by next Monday, Mr Stark.”

“It’ll be there.”
Then, the gap between the door and the floor darkens, followed by two curt knocks and Pepper getting it. Her shocked expression prompts Tony to stand straighter, and instinctively park himself closer to Steve’s bed.

“General Ross,” she greets, and holds the door open to admit an elderly man with hoary hair and moustache. He is tall, and carries an air of military discipline in the way he marches into the ward. His stony expression does not betray what he thinks of Steve lying deathly still in his bed, before he shifts to look squarely at Tony.

“Mr Stark.”

“General. How can we help you?” Tony has no recollection of having conducted businesses or negotiations with Thaddeus Ross. Perhaps they had exchanged polite good-evenings’ at a charity gala or two over the last couple of years. He knows of Ross’ reputations second-hand, enough to be wary of the General’s motives and speeches.

Ross makes to open his mouth, but he shuts it and looks over his shoulder. Pepper stands her ground, but keeps her distance.

“Ma’am, may I have a moment of privacy with Mr Stark?”

“Miss Potts is the CEO of Stark Industries,” Tony interjects. “Assuming you’re here on behalf of our government, and that means whatever you have in that envelope right there,” he looks pointedly at Ross’ hand, “is a proposition either for me, or my tech. In any case, you’ll have to deal with her directly as the patents are wholly held by the company, not me.”

The temperature must’ve dipped several degrees, and Ross’s cool smile widens. “You are quite mistaken, Mr Stark. What I have here,” he raises his envelope to eye level before pulling out the documents it contained. “Is a comprehensive lab report of… shall we say, should-have-been-deceased Captain Steve Rogers and Sergeant James Barnes, and your blood tests. We ran every panel that we can think of. We even sequenced your goddam genome. It shouldn’t come across as surprising to you, so I’ll be blunt. Not one of you are a hundred percent human.”

Tony’s fist clenches by his side as Pepper clasps her mouth in horror. The fact that Ross isn’t the least hesitant to make such serious reveal in the presence of a civilian only meant that he – and the government – has already come to a decision. Ross must’ve heard Pepper’s quickly stifled sharp intake of air, for his next address is for her. “In a week, the committee will release this information to
the public. A unanimous decision has been reached last night. We do not mean to sow discord in trying times like this. But, the people must be alerted of the emergence of enhanced individuals in our midst, so the appropriate… precautions can be taken.”

“You’re assuming they’re criminals when all they’ve done is risked their lives to protect ours!”

“You’re assuming that is what happened, and that these… abilities won’t be mispurpose for malicious intents in time.”

“General –”

Tony raises his hand, and her lips tremble with suppressed fury. “Pepper, enough. General.” Out of the frying pan, and into the fire. “Surely you don’t mean to come all the way from New York to tell us how genetically special we are.”

“Special?” Ross barks, amused. Tony smirks, but dread quickly fills up the recesses of his skull when Ross dangles an unassuming remote control from the end of his finger. “We’ve seen the videos. We know what you can do. You have all been under surveillance from the moment you left the Potomac. Consider your next word and action very carefully, Mr Stark. There are eyes training on you.”

He feels the Extremis clawing inside him, begging to be released as his own frustration and mounting anger strokes it. “Pepper, leave us.”

“Tony –”

“General, leave her out of your schemes. She’s a civilian. She has no fault in this.”

After a long, considering pause, Ross nods slowly, and Tony turns to Pepper fully. He doesn’t speak, but he knows Pepper hears him begging for her to leave, and to be safe. It pains her dearly to step away, but she heeds him, and is soon gone from the ward.

“You are a man of great resources, Mr Stark,” Ross continues as if never interrupted. “I know you have ears in strategic departments within the government. Tell me, have you heard of Project Wide Awake?”
Chapter 54

Sounds like something far beyond his paygrade, and his paygrade is stratospheric. “No, Sir.”

“The United States government has been studying the… problem of enhanced individuals for years. SHIELD was secretly instructed to chair a covert commission to, shall we say, keep a lookout on extraordinary activities in the community. We codenamed it Wide Awake.”

“With due respect, General. If Fury knows about this –”

“He would’ve found some ways to alert you about it. I know Nick and your father go way back. I don’t deny him having a soft spot for you, Mr Stark. And for that exact reason, Alexander Pierce was elected as Chairperson. A shame really, considering recent events.” He sighs, and continues, “You’re a man of the future.” Ross clasps his hands behind his back, and heads for the far window. “Evolution can’t be stopped. What we are as a species won’t stay the same forever. Changes are already happening as we speak. But at this rate? Tell me, if you were in my seat, what would you do about them?”

About people like him? Tony regulates his breathing to the beeping of Steve’s heart monitor. “Establish limits to control their growth. Curtail unusual activities that aren’t crucial for survival, at least temporarily until we understand this issue better.”

“We all fear the unknown, Mr Stark. It’s only natural.”

A vague brush of desiccated knuckles on the back of his wrist almost had him unleash the Extremis. Tony starts and looks around, and his stomach stutters when Steve Rogers is staring back at him. Steve’s chest rises and sinks with effort, but the vigour is unmistakeable. He grabs at the railing and pulls, and Tony rushes in to support him.

“Punishment does not come before the crime, General,” Steve grits out, the heart monitor beeping increasingly loud. “If there even is a crime.”

Ross has turned his back completely against the window, regaling Steve with his utmost attention. His face is still an unsympathetic scowl, and Tony would’ve tipped his hat off to Ross – if he has a hat on – for not buckling under the pressure of Steve’s glare.
“Captain Rogers. How are you feeling?” And Tony reaffirms his hold on Steve. This can go down either way, and he’d rather not involve the Extremis or a super-soldier punch. He’s not one to back out from fights, but this is one that he would bow out before Ross can say “Arrest!” Ross himself fortunately either believes it bad taste to harass a soldier in his sickbed, or is genuinely concerned about Steve’s wellbeing, that he reaches for a beeper dangling from the side of Steve’s bed, and presses it. Hurried footsteps grow louder in the corridor, and Ross retreats towards the far wall. “You have done this country a great service, Captain.” Steve is panting for air, and the front of his hospital gown is dotted with cold sweat. Never once did he allow Ross out of his sight. “Take good care of yourself. Get better.” The door swings open, and a team of medical staff rush through. Ross nods curtly at them. “We will be in touch with you again.”

“Want some more?” Tony’s own mouth is chockfull of apple slices. He hasn’t had regular meals in quite a while, but now that Steve is distinctly awake, his appetite revisits with a vengeance. “I don’t know where Pepper gets this, but this is delish.”

“You’re holding the knife wrong,” Steve frowns at the way Tony deftly slays that poor piece of fruit. “Be careful – hey!”

Too late. The handle slips from his clumsy grip and the blade nicks his index finger in its side. The cut is rather deep, and he chuckles at Steve fumbles for his beeper. “I told you to watch it.”

“It’s fine. I won’t mind a pretty young thing tending to my papercut, but look.” Tony wriggles his injured finger, now glowing brilliantly in orange that the bone structures encapsulated by the flesh are visible. Steve stares at it in awe, but underlying all that Tony senses unrest. And Steve is justified to resent Extremis.

“You need to be careful, Tony.”

“I’m invincible!” He can afford crossing Broadway Street blindfolded. “Finally! Something I can do better than you.”

“Complacency kills. Keep showing off like that, and Ross will cart you off to the nearest lab to work on you.”

“Come on, even he can’t be that savage? Wide Awake aims to lock us up someplace, not experiment on us.” And a kind of darkness clouds Steve’s eyes, that Tony stops messing around with his
mangled apple. “Steve, what happened to you after Project Rebirth?”

A wry smile grows on Steve’s lips, like a bullet through Tony’s heart. “What do you think happened?” Ross calls him a man of the future. A man of science. He’s the engineer, the mechanic, the scientist. He builds things, but being able to build things doesn’t happen overnight. Not even for Tony Stark. He’s torn things apart.

“What do you think happen, Tony?”

“Steve –”

“It’s not rhetoric. I’m asking you.”

Tony replaces the knife and his apple on the side table. “What do you want me to say, huh? My condolences? That I’m sorry?”

“I want… a promise.”

Ross didn’t drop by Steve’s ward for niceties. He is the calm before the storm, and Tony – for all the resources that he has – has decided what he can do with it. “It’s over, Steve,” he whispers, but he might as well have shouted it, given how stricken Steve looks at the admission. It’s the only sane solution. “This isn’t a fight we can win. HYDRA and SHIELD – they’re different. They’re bad. It’s written on the fucking wall. But us? Steve, I am afraid of myself!” Steve is the only one who understands how it feels like living in a cardboard world. Tony leaves his chair and paces the room, Steve’s eyes steadfast on him all the while. “I can’t even begin to fix this when I don’t what the hell is in my body! I know I don’t die easily. I heal like crazy. I can shoot fire out of my eyeballs. How is that normal, huh? Can you blame Ross for wanting to lock me up someplace so I don’t accidentally murder someone? What if it’s the nice lady selling Churros downstairs? What if it's Pepper?”

“You’re saying we need governance?”

“I’m saying I need help.”
Another day, another battle. For now? Tony takes a deep, steadying breath. “You just woke up. I just regained my appetite! I’ve this stupid hankering for a cheeseburger. I can sneak one into the ward for you. Think the nurse out front won’t mind.”

Steve’s hooded eyes droop, and Tony knows it’s Steve-talk for this-isn’t-over. To him, it is. They deserve to savour this win. This is a win, isn’t it? “Our one-eyed nightmare is leaving for Europe tonight.” Steve looks up, one eyebrow cocked. “His death certificate is still, uh, valid. If that’s what you want to ask next.”

“What for? With Pierce gone, there’s a vacancy. Can’t think of a better person to fill in the vacuum. We need leadership we can trust to rebuild the system.”

“Something about the necessity of working from the shadows. If we’re going legit –”

“We are. We’re not criminals, Tony.”

“No, we’re not.” Round and round they go, just chasing tails. “You know what I mean. Anyway, can we – can we not do this now? We deserve a moment’s peace, huh?” That cup of jello sitting in Steve’s hospital food tray looks super fine. “Just you and me, kicking back and hanging out.”

Tony reclaims his plastic chair beside Steve’s bed and helps himself to Steve’s jello. It tastes more like spoonful of refined sugar than anything else, but whatever it takes to take his mind off Ross and the sack of crap that comes with it, until Steve’s gaze positively bore between his eyes that he replaces the half-eaten desserts-for-paupers on the nightstand with a curt tap. “What?”

“I’m sorry for what happened to Howard and Maria.”

“Good God, please don’t…”

“Tony, Bucky – he’s –“
“A dead man.” A heat erupts in his guts when Steve flinches. “Your war buddy is an honest-to-God mass-murderer-for-hire. This isn’t revenge, Steve. This is justice. Can’t wash your hands off those blood. Ever.”

“It wasn’t him,” Steve whispers. “His mind is not his own.”

“Right. And you’re so sure of that because he gave you a three-inch deep stab wound in your right shoulder, three bullet wounds – one of them nearly severing your femoral artery, let’s not forget that – a dislocated jaw and clavicle, bruised kidneys, broken ribs – I don’t know if that’s from the CPR or him trying to murder you. Oh, that, of course. Barnes, trying to murder you.” Tony taps his chin repeatedly with his thumb. “Yeah. I might have missed a couple of things. It was a fantastically detailed medical report. Very entertaining. I almost vomited on the spot.” At least Steve has the decency to look conflicted and miserable – and he should damn well be. Making up excuses for a bloodthirsty lunatic, seriously. Did Barnes beat him up too much it addled him? “So don’t ask me to let it go. Because I can’t.”

Steve’s fist clenches about the corner of his blanket. “Where is he?”

“Not in jail, regrettably.”

“Will you go look for him?”

Sounds fun. “My new year resolution.”

“… There’s so much I want to tell you, Tony. About Bucky. About us. My past. Don’t pretend like you don’t care, I know you do. You’re… the only one who does –” A sharp intake of air breaks up the tension and Tony drops all pretence. He lowers the railing and sits next to Steve, who has somehow resisted doubling over despite having pulled a couple of stitches anew. He pants and grits his teeth, but the sheer conviction in God knows what – Barnes’ innocence? – is blatantly displayed on his features.

To that, Tony can only sigh. He holds Steve up by his arms, and says nothing.

“He’s… the only one I have left, Tony.” Hearing that hurts more than it should. “To remind me of home.”
“… Aren’t I enough?” He hates how his voice cracked. Steve’s shoulders stiffened, and he regrets ever asking it.

“I’m asking… for your kindness. I know I’m asking a lot. Maybe too much, and out of place. I owe you… my life, Tony. Everything that I have now, a home, a renewed purpose. I owe it all to you.”

“What are you asking of me really?”

“… Spare him. He’s no use to you dead. Killing him won’t change anything.” Steve’s trembles worsen as he speaks, and Tony holds on to him tighter. Can’t believe after jumping through hoops of fire, a bleak sequel awaits. There is no turning back, no more returning to the time before he went on national TV and screamed I’m-Iron-Man into the cameras. Teach him not to run his mouth, didn’t it? Ross, a Winter Soldier on the loose, the Extremis. Accountability for his tech. A bloodless legacy. A promising future?

Come what may, he’s ready.

Chapter End Notes

And OH. MY. GOD. It's over! I hope the ending is not too abrupt. Thank you so much for staying with me to the bitter(sweet) end! We have a coda left in the next chapter, and that's it. <3 A sequel awaits, folks. Until then.
The problem with funerals and graves and dead people in the movies is that it always seems to rain when they happen. Clichéd as they may be, perhaps he hasn’t sampled enough scenes. Or maybe there’s a nugget of truth in that. He gets that it’s New York. In February. He misses the West Coast already. So why not go back? Tethered to New effing York by work and duties and honour and what have you is why, dammit. Which explains why Tony Stark is rooted to the muddy ground grasping a plain, black umbrella as raindrops tap dance above his head on a bleak Monday morning, his recently-unfrozen billionaire butt clothed in plainclothes as cheery as the day.

It’s not even a particularly special date. He kind of missed Mom and Dad’s death anniversary by a couple of months. Can’t bear to visit so soon after all that’d happened. After knowing about the truth behind their accident? Murder. Despite all that, it did shit for his soul. Closure… closure be damned. Tony sighs, troubled, and wonders why he would even bother to drop by and say hey.

He pushes past the wrought iron gate leading to the family cemetery and plods along the designated footpath. He never forgets where his parents were laid to rest, no matter how many years have dissolved between the last visit and this one.

Tony stops dead in his track when he catches an unidentified figure kneeling before their headstones. This is private property. The hospice and Foundation complex out front are accessible by the public, sure, but this is blatant trespassing. And for this shmuck to come all the way here without alerting security? Tony flexes his right wrist where he wears a red and gold bracelet, while his left tightens around the handle of his umbrella. He approaches in tiptoes, the light tap of PVC sole on granite drowned out by the cascade of rain around them.

Good God, the kneeling figure is soaked to the bones.

“Move,” Tony threatens, his voice so deep it’s almost a growl, “and I’ll blast your head off. From this distance, I won’t miss.” From this distance, like hell he could misrecognise that face. “James Buchanan Barnes. The Winter Soldier. I have a spare handcuff somewhere, and I know a police station ten minutes’ drive from here.”

The only sign that Barnes is aware of Tony’s presence is his stiffening shoulders. He’s shaking from the cold, and water rolls off the tip of his nose and chin. He might’ve been crying, if Tony wants to believe that. Barnes’ dull glare on the patch of grass does nothing to ease what’s roiling in Tony’s chest.

“You know, one month after I buried my parents twenty years ago, I realised I’d also inherited all of
Dad’s empire. You know the first thing I did with all that money? I bought out the company that manufactured their car. I tore through their design archives – their engines, the hydraulics, the frames – *everything.* Especially the braking mechanisms. I fixed their deficiencies, because I wanted to make sure nobody – *no other kids* – would have to lose their folks in a fucking car crash.”

Barnes’s head dips, and Tony looks away. “OK, I’m done. We don’t do civilities with WMDs. You’re a wanted man, just so you know. General Thaddeus Ross wants you. As much as I hate his mug, I’d like to personally escort you to his office. Easy does it, Barnes.”

Barnes’s fist clenches and unclenches on his thighs. He stays put, the earth beneath him already imprinted with his weight. “I’m here, Mr Stark. If you want to end it…”

The whine of a miniaturised gauntlet repulsor intensifies. “Oh, don’t tempt me.” Tony takes his aim. “Just give me a reason.”

Barnes’ body lists sideway a fraction, and a sudden glint of metallic sets Tony off to hyperaware mode. He blasts Barnes with a non-fatal supersonic wave – the same party trick Obadiah Stane used on him long, long time ago. Fun stuff. The effect is instantaneous, just the way Tony remembers it first-hand. Barnes drops unceremoniously to the ground, mud spattering on his pale, damp cheeks. He’s still very much alive and conscious, but all manners of movement locked within the casket of his body. Just to be sure, Tony prods him carefully with his toes, and decides that even enhanced individuals are susceptible. He reaches around Barnes’ back to retrieve what looks like a 9-mm pistol held in place by his waistband.

“Huh. Why am I not surprised?” With absurd ease, Tony ejects the magazine and upsets it, his expectation of one that is fully-loaded shattered by the fall of a lone bullet onto the grass.

The rain doesn’t lift. God, it’s been pouring.

Tony crushes the now emptied gun with his gauntleted fist and approaches the prone form, his umbrella sheltering them both from the elements. ‘Steve Rogers says you’re no use to me dead. Loathe as I am to agree with him, he’s right.’ More tears leak out of the edge of Barnes’ eyes as they look up to Tony, his face still bizarrely slack. ‘This doesn’t change *anything* between us, you understand?’ Tony hooks his free arm under Barnes’, and he pulls and lugs until Barnes is firmly settled against his side.

“We got work to do.”
Steve Rogers and Tony Stark will return in The Avengers: Civil War.

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