Beyond The Walls Of Sleep

by Chaed, spacelaska

Summary

It started with a portal, a battle for humanity, an empty coffin at Tony Stark's funeral. (It started with a portal, a bomb that never detonated, an act of self sacrifice that was futile.)

Then a distress signal. A last ditch covert-op. A recon mission with little hope of success. (Then a Chitauri cell. A plague ship. Isolation.)

Four years too late they bring Tony home.
Chapter 1

There were bad ideas. And then there was this idea.

The mission briefing was a tense affair. Fury generally looked like he was pretty much brimming over with barely contained temper but today there was an edge of something else. Like he was actually nervous.

It started with Jarvis. A distress call, barely legible, picked up through some of the equipment they'd been tinkering with, a radio frequency which had been frustratingly silent for years.

Bruce had barely looked up at the time, absorbed in something entirely unrelated. In the early days it wasn't uncommon for them to pick up junk signals from here, there and everywhere, before they'd fine tuned the frequency, cast a tighter net. And had ultimately ended up with static silence.

Jarvis had ensured authenticity of the message, a primitive nine-element signal in Morse code pistoning away from Somewhere, Outer Space. And the curious thing was, Jarvis insisted that he'd accurately identified the the sender: the signal had come from himself.

From then it had been a flurry of activity. Bruce had assumed, not unreasonably, that his involvement would end after he'd traced an approximate origin point and passed all the information on to SHIELD and James Rhodes.

Rhodes was more than capable of handling things from there as far as tracking the signal went. The hype subsided a little when they realized they were dealing with a two-year old mayday that was only still broadcasting because it ran on a loop. Remote scanning of the area where the signal originated hadn't thrown up anything but empty space, either.

So it was a coldly unpleasant surprise to be called in to see Fury and be informed that they wanted him, Bruce Banner of all people, to go into space. He'd spent a good forty minutes arguing precisely why that was a terrible idea and surely someone, anyone else could go along as the resident scientific advisor. Someone who had a slightly more normal response to stress, perhaps. But he'd somehow ended up steamrolled into it anyway, not even slightly mollified by Maria Hill's repeated assurances that it had been over four years without a spontaneous incident and he'd probably be fine. The 'probably' was the killer.

Judging from the faces around the briefing table, Bruce wasn't the only one who'd been forcibly persuaded by Nick Fury. Steve Rogers looked positively depressed at the idea and normally he...
perked right up like an eager puppy when someone threw him a good old-fashioned rescue mission. Natasha was entirely unreadable, as ever. Only Rhodes seemed keen to get the show on the road, champing at the bit.

It wasn't that Bruce didn't want to help. He'd been trying to help for four years. It was why he'd moved into Stark Tower at Pepper's request instead of going back to India after the disaster that had been Manhattan. It was why he was pulling all-nighters fine tuning equipment that had little to no hope of yielding anything productive. He just hadn't envisaged that helping would lead to him getting shanghaied into a space mission.

So here they were, four years after Tony Stark had flown a nuke through a portal and never come back in an act of self-sacrifice which had ultimately been futile. Three and a half years since they'd beat back the last of the Chitauri invaders, with an immeasurable death toll, an unimaginable cost in human life. Three years after Tony had been declared legally dead, after his funeral and the public outpouring of grief that had come with it.

Bruce was under no illusions. He didn't share Rhodes' wild hope and optimism, that restless brimming energy which radiated off him in waves. He didn't share Natasha's quiet confidence either, or Steve's palpable anger at having to step in and clean up Tony Stark's mess, four years on.

No, this wasn't a rescue mission, not even close. They were going out there to bring back a corpse. If they were lucky.

“Fury's lost his mind,” Steve declared as they sat around waiting for things to kick off. Bruce didn't normally agree with the supersoldier on many things, but on this he was in complete accordance.

“This is a shot in the dark at best… and no offense, Dr Banner, but I have no idea what you're doing here.”

“None taken,” Bruce replied mildly. He fiddled with the strap on his bag and wondered himself how exactly he'd ended up in this situation. He shamefully suspected that he might have been more firm on not coming if it wasn't for the fact that Natasha was going. But it didn't do to admit that.

There was the matter of Pepper too. He'd never seen, up close and in such excruciating detail, what just the right cocktail of grief and hope could do to a person. If there was a chance that bringing Tony's body home would bring her some closure, it was worth it. Of course, there was always the outside chance that they might find him alive, but he'd run through the probability calculations with Jarvis before setting out, taking as many variables as possible into account. It wasn't looking good.

They had no idea what they'd even find once they got there. A two year old signal meant that Tony must have gotten on board a ship. They weren't likely to find him floating around in the Iron Man suit somewhere in space; he couldn't have possibly lasted more than a few hours in that, let alone a couple of years. Jarvis had been adamant on that, not least because if they went with the theory of the source of the SOS being the AI itself, that presupposed a functional Iron Man suit, which in turn required a viable power source, say, Tony Stark's arc reactor.

“I mean, you said yourself there's nothing out there,” Steve continued, pacing the holding area, a ball of tension in human form.

“I said we're not detecting anything; there's a difference. Either there's nothing there, or whatever is there is really good at hiding.” He wasn't sure if that made things better or worse.

“So either we're going on a wild goose chase, or we're walking into an ambush. Great.” The captain
sat back down and pursed his lips, glaring at Bruce like he wanted to shoot the messenger. “You’re really making this whole thing seem worthwhile.”

Bruce shrugged. “Sorry. I thought I was here as a scientific adviser. I didn’t realize it was my job to boost team morale.”

Steve ignored him and looked to their third team member, who seemed to be far more collected about the whole thing. “What’s your take, Natasha?”

Natasha was either tight-lipped or straightforward about things and currently it was the latter one in effect. “I don’t like it,” she said bluntly. “It’s rushed, it’s unplanned, we’re out of our element and one man down.”

Clint Barton still nursed the fallout of their last mission together and, despite stiff-necked arguments on his part, Fury had rightly decided that an archer with one leg in a cast had no business on a space mission.

As far as Bruce was concerned that was about the extent of Fury’s comprehensible decisions, because shooting three unwilling Avengers plus one emotionally compromised Lieutenant Colonel out of Earth’s orbit was probably the worst idea since publicly executing Loki. Which, admittedly, had earned SHIELD a PR upswing, but had also hounded Thor off the planet for good. Which was too bad, because they could have really used an alien demi-god plus indestructible hammer that wasn’t confined to the laws of physics right about now.

“I agree with Cap,” Natasha continued. “I’ve been in the business long enough to recognize a trap when I see one. We’ve all enjoyed front row seats when it came to dealing with Chitauri. Who says they haven’t salvaged Stark’s suit and activated the distress beacon? It wouldn’t be the first time in human history someone had done that.”

She shrugged her shoulders. “Four years is a long time. Stark is almost certainly dead.” She looked around at her team mates. “If you all think that this is a mission to bring Tony home, you’re idiots. Fury knows fine well that there’s little-to-no chance he’s survived. He’s more interested in that Chitauri ship, and the tech on board.”

Bruce sighed as several things slotted into place for him. Of course this was about the ship; the cost of this mission alone was astronomical and Fury wouldn’t be setting it up if he didn’t think there was going to be a big pay-off at the end. Still, right as she might have been, Natasha’s comments rankled. He wasn’t sure at what point he’d become the cheerleader for the Save Tony movement, but somehow he’d been the one who’d spent four years relentlessly trying to track down any possible signal or sign of life in the first place.

Bruce Banner, patron saint of hopeless cases.

“Probably dead,” he corrected, because that was the best he could muster up in terms of optimism.

“So we’re walking into an alien ambush for what? A new toy for SHIELD? A one in a thousand chance that Stark is still alive?” Steve demanded.

“Actually, it's closer to a one in twenty-six-thousand chance,” Bruce corrected him apologetically, a statement which was apparently received about as well as a fart in a proverbial spacesuit, judging by the look on Steve's face.

“Yeah, well try telling Rhodes that,” Steve muttered. “The way he's acting, you’d think we'd already found his buddy.”
“I’ve talked to Fury about it,” Natasha offered. “Vetoed his spot on the team. War Machine could be an asset, but Rhodes is too emotionally invested in this. He could jeopardize the mission.”

Because bringing along one more helping hand was going to so spectacularly thwart their odds on an already hopeless cause.

Natasha furrowed her eyebrows. “Has anyone entertained the idea that Jarvis could be malfunctioning?”

Bruce frowned. He thought briefly about the concept of a probably-sentient AI going slowly mad alone in space with the decomposing corpse of his master. It was not a pleasant idea to entertain and he was ashamed to realize that he hadn't really considered the possibility. He was so used to working on an almost daily basis with Jarvis, the Stark Industries iteration of Jarvis at least, that he'd come to see him as completely, incontrovertibly dependable.

But there was also no question about the fact that Jarvis was far, far more human than a computer program should be.

“It's unlikely,” he said, pushing that thought out of his head. “I know it's a long shot but I still think that the most likely explanation is that Tony was alive when that signal went out. Jarvis isn't something that can easily be brute-forced into doing something unless it was in Tony's interests. I'm not entirely convinced that we're going to find him alive. But I'm equally not convinced that this is a deliberate trap.”

Or at least, if he said it enough, he might believe it.

“Well, you'll forgive me if I don't share your faith, doctor.” Steve had a really irritating habit of refusing to call Bruce by his first name, despite the fact that they'd known each other for years now, been fighting side by side and that the Hulk had saved his life on a few occasions. He suspected it was because Steve had never been at ease with the idea of Bruce being 'on the team'. Not that he'd ever wanted to be on the team in the first place.

He looked at Natasha and tried to offer some kind of reassurance. “Look, we'll check it out. If it looks suspicious, we can turn around and come back. It'll just be the most expensive recon mission in history.”

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to Beyond The Walls of Sleep, which is the first in a pre-written quadrilogy. Updates weekly.

At the end of every chapter you will find a small Easter Egg, ranging from concept art, puzzle, video or audio. We want you to have an out-and-out experience with this. Feel free to submit stuff of your own. All media will be separately published on our tumblr, spacewhalesrock.

For today's extra... we secured a recording of Jarvis' distress call for you. Dr Banner had great success with Morse code and spectrum analyzers, which we recommend checking out in case you want to further... expand your reading experience. View it here.

Drop us a line.
James Rhodes carefully steered the shuttle towards the enormous bulk of the ship. It nipped towards it at a sickening speed; everything handled differently in space. The simulations hadn't prepared him for just how over-responsive the thing would feel. He was an excellent pilot, top of his class, but he wasn't an astronaut. The gauntlets on War Machine were retracted to give him some kind of fine motor control, but he still felt like he was far too heavy handed. Romanoff, who played navigator beside him, seemed to be of the same opinion judging by the way she slammed her foot down on the invisible brakes whenever Rhody went a little overboard with the acceleration.

Despite all scans being negative, the giant fuck-off Chitauri ship had been hard to miss on approach. Between the four of them they suspected some form of alien stealth tech, luring unsuspecting passersby into a treacherous sense of security before popping the mother of all warships in their faces. Rhody thought, not for the first time, how fucked they would have been if this badass flattop had landed on the roof of the Chrysler building during the Battle For New York.

There was barely a sign of life from the ship. The shuttle was small but even so, Rhody had been on edge anticipating a volley of fire and was already mentally rehearsing his defensive maneuvers. Surely someone had already seen them coming?

Nothing happened. The shuttle sped through the perfect stillness of space, undisturbed.

They approached the docking port, a gaping maw in the belly of the vessel which beckoned them into the looming darkness. They'd run the scans several times; this was their best way in, but it was a wing and a prayer whether they'd make it.

There was no other option, though. Tony was alive, he had to be, and he was counting on them getting there in one piece, crashing the party and bringing him home. Rhody remembered the moment when they'd spotted him, half-dead and dehydrated in the Afghan desert. He'd known when he set out that morning that Tony would be out there somewhere. Today, after four years of settling for a dispiriting reality, it was hard to feel that same confidence, but he willed it into being regardless.

Taking a deep breath in and out, he cleared his mind, focused everything on that inky blackness ahead of them, and guided the shuttle through. There was a scrape of protest as it glanced off the edge of the opening, which prompted an “Everything alright?” from Rogers, which Rhody could translate well enough to meaning ‘What the Hell are you playing at?’.

The lights from the shuttle were barely enough to spot a clear deck, hardly optimal conditions for his first time ever landing a spaceship in real life. He brought the craft down as gently as he could, but they hit the deck with a thud and a scrape and he really hoped that SHIELD hadn't splurged too much on the paint job on this thing.

They stepped out of the shuttle one by one, weapons up, everyone on edge, the flickering, dying lights of the cavernous arrival bay giving the place a sickly, erratic atmosphere. They held their
breaths for an ambush that never came.

“We’re stable on oxygen levels.” Romanoff glanced over the stats on the bio-scan. “Slightly lowered atmospheric pressure. Nitrogen within limits. You got the same readings, Rhodes?”

“Affirmative.”

“You’re good to pop off the gas masks then, boys.” Leading by example Romanoff unlatched the SHIELD issue breather that put NASA to shame on any given day.

Rhodey pursed his lips and frowned to himself. There was an unmistakable stench of death in the air, even after passing through War Machine’s air filters. Four years ago he might have gagged at the smell but he’d seen so many, too many, bodies pile up as they beat back the invading hordes of Chitauri, gradually reclaiming New York, each secured territory a bloody and hard won victory. He’d seen war, seen plenty of it back on Earth, but at least when one fought human beings there was some kind of unspoken code. The Chitauri were savages, animal and cruel.

And the four of them had just voluntarily set foot into one of their biggest strongholds.

“Hate to be the cliche here, folks, but it’s too quiet,” Rhodey muttered.

Behind him, Banner cleared his throat mildly and produced a tiny flashlight from his pocket. It illuminated a good portion of the hall. Then the reason for the smell became all too apparent.

The place was littered with alien corpses. They were sprawled out in clusters, dozens of them. The whole ship seemed to be a Chitauri catacomb.

War Machine switched into combat-ready mode at the same time as Captain America pulled out his shield. Romanoff covered Banner, who was the only one of the group attracted rather than repelled by the frankly advanced grade of their hosts’ decomposition.

“What could have done this?” Rogers wanted to know. Rhodey suddenly had absolutely no desire to meet whatever creature was capable of wiping out alien mercenaries en-masse.

“This is very interesting.” Banner murmured, seemingly more to himself than to the others. “Whatever killed them did it quickly, so quickly, that they hardly had time to react.”

What presented a scientific phenomenon to Bruce Banner was a string of military implications to James Rhodes. A Chitauri ship just outside of Earth’s orbit was no stellar news to begin with, but a Chitauri ghost ship transmitting on a Morse encrypted SOS frequency bordered on b-level science fiction.

Rhodey poked an armored foot at one of the corpses. “Looks like they’ve been here for a while. What’s the estimate on time frame?”

“What’s the estimate on virulence?” asked Romanoff from the back. Yeah, so alien pox might not be a thing for Cap or the Hulk, but between the two common-place humans they couldn’t take any risks.

Banner was down on one knee examining the remains. “Impossible to tell much at this stage. I'd need more data.”

“So… what?” Captain America looked less than thrilled. “We just wait and see if we get sick? Or if something bigger wiped them out we just hope we don’t run into it?”
Banner shrugged, his tone even. “I'm not going to give you false reassurance and I'm not going to scaremonger either. Like I said... I need more data.”

Rhodey huffed a little.

“Then maybe we should step away from the corpses and find out what the heck happened here.”

That was apparently Romanoff’s cue, because she pointed them towards the nearest door. As far as Rhodey was aware, SHIELD had provided her with some device to access whatever the equivalent of a computer was if they found one. Fury had given her the bug personally. Like many things surrounding Natasha Romanoff, it wasn't entirely clear what she was put up to, but she evidently had somewhere to be.

Each of them had their own little errands to run, which all culminated in giving SHIELD access to the ship’s tech so they could set up Earth with a more sophisticated defense system than last-century’s atom bombs.

Romanoff looked at the men around her. She seemed more on edge than she had been on previous missions and Rhodey wondered if it had anything to do with Barton not being there to cover her six.

“Well, what are we waiting for? Looks like we missed out on the red carpet.” She nodded to Rhodey, whose armor seemed to be their best bet in terms of front-line defense. “Why don’t you take point, Colonel?”

“So the monsters get to jump me first? Team spirit, Romanoff.”

War Machine's HUD created a map as they went along. Rhodey glanced minutely at the motion tracker on the interface’s downright corner. While they had been able to pinpoint the SOS’ rough coordinates in space, he wasn’t able to get a clear read on its origin now that they were aboard the ship. To War Machine it looked like they were standing right in the middle of it, like the signal was bouncing off the walls and messing with his transceiver. That would add a considerable challenge in locating Tony, since they were dealing, at a rough estimate, with the surface area of a mid-sized city. And unless they inadvertently tripped over the local liquor store Rhodey doubted that they'd be able to keep to the in-and-out concept Captain America seemed to want to pull off.

The setting held an eerie reminiscence to Sigourney Weaver’s Alien escapades, which he now regretted viewing prior to their departure. They advanced through deserted corridors, stepping over and around a not dwindling number of Chitauri remains. Banner inspected them on a sample basis, but found no sign of struggle or critical injuries. Rhodey knew from personal experience the amount of damage Chitauri could take without as much as batting an eye. These here looked, for all intents and purposes, like someone had hit the kill-switch and dropped them all simultaneously.

Rounding a corner they made slow, cautious progress deeper into the bowels of the ship. Rhodey stumbled against something metallic in the dark and threw a light on what was at his feet. The corpse of something vaguely arthropod was lying in a half-putrefied state within the serrated jaws of a steel trap, which was connected with a string of haphazard wiring to a power outlet on the wall.

Banner was already on it with his flashlight, muttering something about rudimentary ultrasonic transducers and motion detection while Rogers wrinkled his nose at the smell. Rhodey thought that this was probably one situation where having preternaturally enhanced senses wasn't doing the Captain any favors.

“Explanation?” Rogers pressed.
Rhodey poked an armored boot at the squishy had-been. “Looks like pest control. Maybe they had a critter problem.”

“I doubt they would have cared for that very much,” Banner objected, pointing at a Chitauri corpse close by. “Because they were already very dead when this—” he swerved the flashlight back onto the carrion. “- went out on its last walk.”

Romanoff pieced it together. “Survivors?”

“Well,” Banner started and pushed his glasses up the bridge of his nose. “This thing…” - alien spider guts - “…survived these things…” - Chitauri cadavers - “…and some other thing…” - he traced the wire back into the wall - “…killed the first thing.”

“That was a genuinely scientific answer, doc,” Rhodey said.

Banner waved him off. “So, yes. At one point, there were survivors. Maybe there still are. The question is, what did they survive?”

Thoroughly unsettled and stuck for an answer they abandoned the corpses, with Romanoff putting some effort into dragging Banner away from his preoccupation with the mechanics of the trap.

Eventually they came upon a room that, with a little bit of squinting, could look like some sort of power node. A set of monitors loomed in the darkness and Romanoff made a beeline for them. She fished a little device from her pocket, about the size of a USB flash, and attached it to the back of one of the screens. A green light started to blink on the drive.

It seemed like a Hell of a pre-planned detour for what Rhodey had ostensibly been led to believe was a rescue mission.

“So, this is what SHIELD really wanted you to do?” he asked her, frowning behind his faceplate. “Scope out Chitauri tech? I thought we were looking for Tony?”

Romanoff didn’t glance up. “Look, you and I both know that SHIELD didn't sign off on a multi-million dollar mission just so they had a body to fill an empty coffin with. As big a PR win as bringing back Iron Man would be. They're not a charity, Rhodes.”

“Which isn't to say,” Banner interrupted hastily. “That finding Tony isn't important. Even if it's not the main reason they funded the mission, it's still a priority.”

Rhodey felt a surge of annoyance at the time they were wasting. Fair enough for wanting to recon alien weaponry but surely anyone could see that it could wait until they'd located Tony. “Yeah, well maybe we should focus on bringing home one of our own before we start…” he began but was cut off as the console started beeping.

“Abrah kadabrah,” Romanoff murmured, a satisfied smirk quirking her lips.

A split second later, there was a noise of static and electrical protest in the bowels of the power node.

Captain America, who had been guarding the door until now, looked around sharply. “What was-?”

As if on cue, the flickering of the lights went from a regular guttering to a wild short circuit. Rhodey took a moment to feel thankful that he didn't have epilepsy.

“I don't think it liked that much,” Rogers muttered.
Banner handed the drive back to Romanoff with an apologetic half-shrug. “It was worth a try,” he said in a tone that was far more conciliatory than Rhodey privately thought was warranted, given that she’d just caused a shortage while they were trapped in an alien tin can, in space.

Banner went on. “We can’t afford to fry whatever generator this ship runs on. Chances are it hasn’t been maintained in a while, judging by the rate of decomposition on the crew. I don’t want to run the risk of losing power to the oxygen support systems.”

“What was that, anyway?” Rhodey pointed to the device.

“I was trying to back up the hard drive,” Romanoff said flippantly, scanning the surface for an accessible place to reinsert her gimmick. “It’s a good habit to get into.”

Rogers shot a glance at Rhodey, looking uncomfortable. Rhodey, for his part, felt quite glad that his own expression of trepidation was curtained by War Machine’s impassive features.

“We should press on,” Captain America said.

As they left the relative safety of the control room they came upon a myriad of metal doors, some of which were twisted and buckled, some of which were intact. Various hieroglyphics and markings were dotted around, daubed in often noxious smelling substances, reds and greens and luminous blues, alternating X’s and O’s, and rows of bizarre symbols splashed seemingly at random. In some areas, keypads looked to have been taken apart, breaker boxes ransacked with cables torn out, wires crudely soldered to one another.

“Doctor, any word on what these mean?” Rogers asked. Rhodey suspected that the Captain was one of those people who assumed that ‘science’ was a single discipline which covered everything from medicine to alien iconography.

“No.” Banner’s reply was frank and to the point.

“I’m guessing that’s either their take on Minesweeper, or we’ve got another argument of there being survivors.” Rhodey pointed to the jury rigged breaker boxes. “These look like pretty desperate repair jobs.”

“Uhhh, guys?” Romanoff had investigated up ahead. “I think there’s your answer…”

A single door, with what looked to be explosives wired to the lock and an ugly but effective reinforcement job on the bolt loomed ahead. On the wall next to it, painted in the same blue substance they’d seen on the other doors, was a large arrow and next to it in can’t-miss-it handwriting were the words ‘FUCK NO’.

“Looks like we’ve got proof of human life,” Romanoff murmured.

“Stark?” Rogers voiced aloud.

“Stark,” Banner was grinning as he nodded.

A surge of something that felt a lot like hope tore through Rhodey’s chest.
Welcome back and thank you for your support so far! We hope you enjoyed yourselves with the Easter Egg for Chapter 1! For all those who haven't attempted it yet, we strongly suggest you try your hands at free online morse decoders and spectrum analyzers. You won't regret it.

Today, we revisit the closing scene of Chapter 2.

The message on the wall shouldn't be too difficult to decode...let us know how you get on.

As always, feel free to join us over on tumblr.
“You guys, we’re coming up to the time limit for recon.”

A ticker counted down in a corner of War Machine’s HUD. They’d been giving the place a preliminary sweep for close to three hours now. HQ expected a word at 0500 sharp and there was the matter of stocking up on provisions too. At this point it was pretty clear that this wasn’t going to be a simple drive-thru stop.

The ship was multi-leveled, for one. Most main connecting routes were either locked, bolted or otherwise inaccessible, necessitating circumnavigation which took them farther and farther away from the shuttle’s location tag on Rhodey’s GPS.

“We should head back,” Romanoff agreed. “Looks like we’re having a sleepover and I left my pyjamas back on the shuttle.”

“Maybe I can recalibrate for the SOS,” Rhodey said. “The architecture here screws with my systems. I can see why Tony reverted to graffiti.” What he didn’t voice was the other possibility; that wall paintings in questionable substances might have been the only available option to Tony at the time. Nothing of what they’d found so far hinted at recent events. Wherever Tony was, it wasn’t here, no trace of him in the meandering tunnels and dead stale air besides the old, dried graffiti. It was anybody's guess how long it had been there and where the half-desperate hand that had made them might be now.

He glanced at another X on a door and decided that restocking his arsenal wasn’t a bad idea. Just in case they needed something a little stronger than a muffin basket for the neighbors. His M134 mini-gun, lovingly dubbed Uncle Gazpacho, seemed like an appropriate substitute.

“All right,” Rogers relented, although he didn’t seem happy about prolonging their stay. “We double back to the shuttle, get what we need, signal to HQ that the field trip's been extended and then we see if we can piece together what the hell happened on this ship.”

The team crept in silence back the way they’d come. Banner had fallen behind, at a distance from the rest of the group. Rhodey wondered if he was breaking away from the pack in case his not-so-little green friend made an appearance. Or maybe he was just avoiding having to talk to anyone.

Rhodey looked at Widow, who’d been utterly voiceless since the fiasco with whatever drive she'd used to accidentally short the power. She seemed more contemplative than contrite but it was anyone's guess really. Nobody did poker face like Natasha Romanoff and Rhodey suspected that every facial expression, her body language, what she spoke and how she articulated it was calculated at all times.

“So, did SHIELD give everyone side missions? Am I the only one who's actually here for Tony?” he voiced eventually. He couldn't really help himself and besides, they were supposed to have each other's backs. They needed to at least be able to nominally trust each other. He popped his faceplate back and met Romanoff’s eyes.

“Are we playing 'hold the truth stick' now?” Romanoff arched an eyebrow in his direction. “Of course SHIELD gave me orders. Hook their drive up to a main port, let it do its thing and bring it
back. Just in case the mission ends up a wash and they aren’t able to recover the ship. Then at least they’d have a hope at getting some schematics, or intel. It's hardly a sinister plot, Rhodes, so calm down. Just means that this isn't a single-objective mission. Don’t tell me the military plays by other rules,” she said. “If anything, you should be grateful because we wouldn't be up here in the first place looking for your buddy if it wasn’t for the fact that SHIELD has a stake in the game.”

Rhodey tried to think of a counter argument but he was forced to admit that she had a point. It wasn't a very palatable point, but it made sense nonetheless. He turned to Rogers. “So how about you? Do you have any secret side quests you want to get off your chest, Captain?”

“I'm not carrying any of those...” Rogers waved vaguely in Romanoff's direction. “...uh... doodahs. I still can't get my head around most 21st century kitchen appliances. Do you really think they're going to send me to space to mess around with alien computers?” He seemed to be at least aiming for a lighthearted tone but there was an undercurrent of tension that caused his words to come off with a distinctly bitter edge. “I'm just the unwilling muscle on this trip.”

“Unwilling?” Rhodey gave him an incredulous look. “I'm having a hard time believing that anyone could force you into doing pretty much anything against your will.”

Rogers shrugged non-committally. There was something a little sad about the gesture. “You think you can't be bought right up until the moment that someone names the right price.”

“What do you...?” Rhodey began but the captain had already stalked off up ahead to take point, his shoulders bristling. It was a fairly clear indication that the conversation was over.

“For what it's worth,” Banner piped up from the back of the group with a slight wave. “I don't have a special SHIELD mission.”

Rhodey didn't doubt that for a moment, given that Banner's main function so far had been to point at things and say 'hmm' a lot. The scientist didn't really seem like the lying type either; Rhodey could easily believe that if SHIELD had tasked him with a covert operation, he'd have blurted it out within ten minutes of boarding the shuttle.

“Well, I'm here for Tony,” Rhodey repeated, drawing a finger across one of the O marked doors, which everyone by now agreed had to have come, at some point in time, from Tony himself. “And I'm not gonna leave without him.”

By the time they were closing in on their destination Rhodey wondered if he had maybe jinxed it with that last statement. He pursed his lips into a grimace at the sight of their newest stumbling block.

“Are you sure this is the way?” Captain America knocked on the reinforced shutter that covered the door standing between them and the shuttle bay. “Because this wasn’t here before.”

“Sure as eggs ain’t chicken,” Rhodey said, refreshing the interactive map for the umpteenth time. They hadn’t wandered off the dotted line at any point. “The hangar should be just behind these walls.”

“He’s right,” Romanoff said, pointing to an inconspicuous scratch to the left side of the door frame. “This is my mark.”

Rhodey huffed. “You don’t trust my tech?”

“I do. But just in case the evil witch cooks you in her gingerbread house I left a trail of breadcrumbs.”
Rhodey shot her a mock-insulted glare. “War Machine is not on anyone’s dinner menu. Now step aside and let me handle this.”

Unfortunately it turned out that repulsor blasts didn’t even nick the paint job on the blocked door. It was equally resistant to American patriotism, aka Steve Rogers’ vibranium shield.

“All right, let’s ditch the niceties.” Rhodey let his faceplate click into place and a cover retracted from War Machine’s pauldron, revealing a set of four pods of propelled grenades. “Everybody, safety distance.”

Everybody but Bruce Banner complied. The gamma scientist stood dead center in Rhodey’s firing range.

“Not a good idea,” Banner said, hands up in a ‘stop!’ gesture. “You don’t know why this went into lockdown. There could be a hull breach on the other side.”

“It went into lockdown because Natasha pissed off the resident computer system,” Rogers offered.

“No proof, no claims,” Romanoff said defensively.

“Let’s just not take the risk of blowing us into space, ok?” Banner argued. “There has to be a way around this.”

“Yes, one that’ll get us all killed,” Rogers muttered darkly.

“Cheer up, Cap,” Romanoff countered brightly. “If you’re really lucky, you might get the chance to hit something with that shield of yours.”

At Banner’s insistence, they began a search for an alternative way into the shuttle bay. Rhodey gave Romanoff a boost up into the air vents, where she disappeared for a while before landing back down several feet behind them, dust and grime flecked through her titian hair.

“It’s a no go, boys.” She pointed in the direction of the closed-off bay. “Re-enforced steel blocking the vent system from that part of the ship.”

“Makes sense,” Banner added. “They’re not going to have a lockdown system that blocks a hangar with a shutter like that, then leave a crawlspace to get in.”

“You couldn’t have mentioned that before I got a few years worth of space crud in my hair?” Romanoff teased, but she didn’t seem genuinely annoyed. At least whatever tension had been there after their queasy conversation about the mission seemed to have dissipated for the moment.

“I guess we try to find another way around,” Rogers said curtly.

Rhodey thought to himself that no, they should be trying to find where the Hell Tony could be instead, but since Captain America’s plan seemed to be to wander aimlessly looking for another way into the bay, and War Machine was the only one with any semblance of a map, he just let him lead the way. At least every further uninhabited inch of the ship that they were covering was another place they could out Tony being.

They continued for a good hour or so, the sullenness punctuated by some sighs of frustration from Rogers and the odd excited murmur from Banner as he stopped to admire the wall art. Most of it looked like, well frankly, like it had been scrawled by someone half-deranged. Runs of symbols that
made no sense, occasional obscenities in foot-high letters, the familiar pattern of Xs and Os which
seemed to indicate which doors were unlocked and safe to proceed through. And, on one occasion, a
looped diagram which Captain America kept insisting could be a map or a route to somewhere but
which Rhodey was reasonably certain was just a crude drawing of a dick and balls.

The fact that the wall graffiti was increasing in frequency the deeper they went into the ship was a
good sign, although it still went no way towards explaining what had actually happened or whether
they had any hope of finding Tony alive.

The more ground they covered the more it felt like they were looking for a needle in a haystack, a
fact which Rogers kept pointing out at half hour intervals. Romanoff was still looking chipper and
they were keeping a brisk speed but Banner seemed like he was starting to flag a little,
understandably struggling to keep pace with an enhanced supersoldier, a guy wearing hydraulically
assisted armor and a spy trained up to Soviet excellence.

The deathly quiet of the ship had become such a constant, oppressive companion by that point that
Rhodey almost thought he'd imagined it when he heard a faint noise from up ahead. The sound of
metal on metal and the faint hissing of electrical wires protesting against something.

Rogers was first to point, nudging Rhodey and jerking his head in the direction of the corridor that
branched off in front of them. Even with War Machine's enhanced visual interface, it took Rhodey a
moment to focus onto whatever Cap's superhuman eyesight had honed in on.

A figure in the distance.

So it seemed that at least one of the Chitauri had survived.

Had it seen them? They stopped in their tracks, watching it scuttling about in the obscure corridor. Its
skin hung around its shoulders in loose, limp sheets and it had a hunched shuffling gait. Not entirely
unscathed, from the looks of it. Malnutrition? He supposed aliens could starve just like any other
being.

Rhodey narrowed his eyes. This thing didn't move like the battle-hardened creatures he'd fought
against to retake Manhattan. That purposeful, rippling gait wasn't there. The runt of the litter, maybe?

Still, the only good Chitauri was a dead one.

Banner kept to the back of the group. Clearly he was more interested for the moment in observing
rather than fighting. Code Green was always going to be the last-resort nuclear option and they
needed to ration his deployment carefully. The last thing they needed was a smash-happy goliath
tearing through the hull on a rampage.

Besides, they'd fought worse than this little scumbag.

Motioning to Romanoff, Rhodey gestured silently towards the creature, which gave no signs of
having spotted them yet. The corridor was narrow enough to go for a good old head-on approach, he
supposed. But before he had the chance to formulate a play Cap was already charging ahead,
throwing his weight behind his shield as he launched himself for a blunt force blow to the creature's
head.

Rhodey cocked his head to one side as the scavenger Chitauri collapsed under the force of Cap's
shield like a rag doll. Even Rogers seemed taken aback by how easily the thing had gone down. It
felt almost anti-climactic. These creatures were ordinarily tough as nails.

“Cap.” Rhodey stepped in before Rogers could raise his shield for a killing blow. “Something isn't
Banner shoved his way through. “At the very least, let me examine it first. It’s the only live one we’ve found so far.”

Rogers hesitated before bringing his shield down to his side. It was quite clear that he wasn’t thrilled about exercising leniency, but Banner had a point. And besides, it was four against one.

Banner nodded to a nearby door, the glass pane revealing a junk room, perhaps some kind of armory or engineering supply closet that had long since been picked clean of anything useful. Between them, Rogers and Romanoff managed to get the Chitauri inside and onto a table and Banner produced his flashlight. The guy was hanging on to that thing like a hair on a biscuit.

“There’s something off here,” Banner murmured. “This is Chitauri on the outside, alright, but...”

He grabbed a fold of loose hide and let it flop down, then began poking and prodding around the creature’s body. “I guess it would make a kind of sense.”

Cap let out an exasperated sigh. “What?”

“Chitauri don’t usually have seams,” Banner said slowly. “Either there’s something else going on here or I’m about to perform an accidental vivisection.”

He rummaged around in his pocket for a moment and frowned. As if reading his mind Romanoff handed him a slightly bent, rusty looking blade from atop a pile of half-stripped wires.

There was a squelching noise as he worked the knife into the places where the thing’s hide seemed to have been crudely joined together. Thick, viscous clear fluid oozed, but there was no blood. The creature didn’t react either, despite Banner blindly groping between the folds of exoskeleton.

Suddenly, he jerked back as though he’d been shocked. Then he began worrying at the rest of the carapace with a renewed urgency. “Help me peel the skin off.”

Rogers, watching the scene from the doorway where he’d planted himself to play bruise boy, arched an eyebrow and gave a puzzled look. “And you would want to do that because...?”

“Because I think there’s a person in here.”

That was as much prompt as Rhodey needed. Clasping armored fingers around a patch of Chitauri hide he began to tear it off strip by strip.

“Careful,” Banner urged, assisting him in flaying whatever their new, Chitauri-replicating friend was. Rhodey had his hands in the thing’s chest cavity when all of a sudden it jerked under their touch, moaning loudly, as if only now having registered the undoubtedly painful treatment it had been subjected to.

Then, with a whirling leap and a yelp it tumbled off the table and crashed backwards across the room’s furnishings, trailing pieces of itself in its wake. Rhodey was already raising his arm and charging his weapon to fire, Romanoff had adopted a defensive stance and Rogers’ shield was raised by the time the thing had tumbled from table to floor. An uncoordinated nose dive abruptly ended its scramble, on the ground and backed against the far wall.

In its struggle it had lost its helmet.

Four jaws collectively dropped as the wild, bloodshot eyes of someone long dead blinked back at
And if it hadn’t been for those eyes, Rhodey would have struggled to recognize him. His hair was unevenly cropped, standing on end, with an equally uncharacteristically unkempt beard. His shirt, peeking out from the now disintegrating rig, hung stained and tattered on a frame that was a good few pounds underweight. What they could see of his skin was grey and filthy, sun-starved. He looked smaller, somehow, as though he’d lost height, although it was probably just the fact that Rhodey had never seen Tony Stark, with his over-the-top confidence and swagger, hunched and cowering from anything in his life.

The worst thing of all though wasn’t the thinness or the dirt or the fact that he looked like a terrified space hobo. No, the worst was the empty space where his left forearm should have been, the fabric of his shirt fluttering uselessly over nothing at all.

“That's Tony Stark...” Bruce pointed out entirely unnecessarily, breaking the unbearably stifling silence that had flooded the room. In his corner, Tony twitched at the mention of his name or maybe just the unfamiliar sound of another human voice.

Rhodey was the first to move. Approaching as though he were inching towards a stray animal, he let the helmet of his suit fall back, revealing a face that he hoped was still recognizable to the man in front of them.

But as he moved in Tony backed himself closer against the wall, regarding Rhodey with all the wariness reserved for a chancy stranger. His right hand was sweeping the surface of the wall as though looking for a weapon, and Rhodey recognized his cornered stare as that of a man who was preparing to defend himself.

He backed off, giving him space. He remembered from some long ago training session that you were supposed to do that with rescued POWs; take care not to crowd them, avoid loud noises and sudden movements. He held his hands up in a pacifying gesture.

“Ok, everybody get the fuck out,” Rhodey hissed over his shoulder. Then he softened his voice a little. “Seriously, guys. Give us a moment here.”

Rogers and Romanoff filed out first, with Banner hanging back momentarily, like he wanted to say something and then thought better of it, before leaving with the others.

“Fuck.” Rhodey exhaled out loud, because there wasn’t much else that summed it up. He tried again, leaning against the table next to where Tony blinked at him in confusion. “Look, I get that this is probably a lot to take in...”

Tony’s eyes kept flitting back and forth between War Machine and the door, before he pointed a jittery finger at one of the close-by boxes and spoke up for the first time.

“I’m gonna sit down for a minute, if that’s ok?” His voice came out hoarse, like he was nursing a sore throat. Or like he hadn’t talked in a very, very long time.

Rhodey watched solemnly as Tony crumpled onto the upturned crate, looking for all the world like he was about to keel over the very next moment. One thing was encouraging, though. The fact that he was even alive at all, the way he’d rigged that Chitauri exoskeleton into a biomechanical second skin. The fact that, in hindsight, they’d probably surprised him doing repairs on the ship. Those were all promising signs that, no matter what else had gone down, at least Tony was still himself in some shape or form, an impossibly gifted engineer and resourceful mechanic to the very last.
Tony looked up, scrutinized him for a drawn out moment, before he nodded skeptically to the tally marks on War Machine’s right chest plate. “What’s that?”

Rhodey frowned, having expected some more spectacular form of ‘thank fuck you finally came for me’ than Tony wanting to know who’d vandalized his suit. But then again, the wall inscriptions they’d seen so far spoke volumes about Tony’s current mental state. Rhodey had seen guys coming back out of A-Stan, thrown into holes in the desert, with isolation gnawing away at their sanity. This was fucked up on an entirely different level.

He decided to play along for the moment. “I took out a lot of those Chitauri bastards back in the Reclaiming. Figured I should start keeping score,” he began, but before he could continue, Tony started as if a switch had turned inside his head. He wet his lips and squinted, one eye continuously trained on the door.

“How’d you make it through the portal again?” Tony asked warily.

“No portal.” Rhodey kept his voice even. “It’s been four years. The portal you traveled through changed your location, sent you millions of miles out. But this ship must have been on a pretty steady run towards Earth in the meantime. Once you were close enough to orbit, Banner and Jarvis picked up your distress call. We tracked it.” His voice cracked a little, the measured tone giving way to raw emotion. “We weren’t expecting to find you alive.”

“No. That can’t be,” Tony said with renewed certainty, like he’d found the crux in the story and Rhodey had just given himself away. “A ship malfunction woke me. I should still be asleep. We’re not home yet. You’re not...” He took a deep breath, squeezed his eyes shut and counted to ten aloud with an air of practiced routine, as if Rhodey wasn’t the first apparition he was dealing with. When he opened his eyes again he looked visibly distressed.

“You’re not here,” he repeated, a hitch in his voice. “You’re not, you’re not, you’re not.”

“Ok...” Rhodey said. “Hang on there, ok? Just... wait.” He advanced on Tony a little, taking him gently by the shoulders. Tony’s pupils widened like a startled cat’s and he touched a restraining hand against War Machine’s iron chest.

“Slow down, all right? I’m not gonna disintegrate into thin air. None of us are. You don’t have to do anything now except get in the shuttle and come home with us.”

The shuttle that they couldn't currently access. Of course. But now didn’t seem the right moment to mention that. He was having a hard enough time convincing Tony that he wasn't a figment of his imagination, no need to complicate things further right now.

“There can’t be a shuttle,” Tony pressed, eyeing him suspiciously, as though he didn't quite know him. “There’s no compatible docking port.” He pushed again lightly against Rhodey's cuirass. “How would you have landed it?”

“Badly,” Rhodey fessed up. “But it's there. And it's operational.”
Tony gingerly extricated himself from Rhodey’s grip and he let him go, not wanting to make him feel trapped.

“I know I’m having a head trip, ok? Already wished the others away,” Tony said, pointing to the empty room around them. “You’re a bit more feisty, alright, but you’re wasting your… uh, my time.” He tapped a finger to his temple. “I’ve dealt with worse, yeah? This is obviously just from the cycle imbalance.”

Rhodey’s face creased for a moment. Hearing his best friend talk like that was beyond painful. He let one of the gauntlets on War Machine retract, using his bare hand to cover Tony’s.

“Look, I’m real.” He pulled Tony’s fingers against his wrist. “See. Pulse and everything. The others are real too. The only reason they’re not here right now is because you seemed kinda overwhelmed, buddy. Which isn’t surprising. You’ve been here a really long time and we just show up out of nowhere. I get how that would mess with your head.”

He wondered how many times Tony had imagined this exact scenario, how long into his prolonged isolation before he’d started having these kinds of hallucinations. Tony spoke like this was a not-unfamiliar scenario for him and Rhodey asked himself just how crushing it must have been the first time he’d believed that they were real and then found himself back at square one, still stranded in space. That was the kind of hope that could destroy a man. He could understand Tony not taking things at face value, even if it was going to make this a Hell of a lot more complicated.

Rhodey winced. “Look man, I really don’t know how to prove to you I’m real other than asking you to trust me on this one. Why don’t you just… play along for the moment? We’ll show you the shuttle and you can make up your mind there.”

Supposing that they found a way to access the shuttle bay, otherwise all Tony would get to see was a door blockade, and that was hardly going to sway him.

“I’ve got places to be,” Tony insisted.

“Yeah, I like what you’ve done with the interior decor around here,” Rhodey said, trying his hand at a little humor. “But maybe you can free up your schedule for just a bit?”

Tony’s expression remained blank, and Rhodey tried again. “At some point it’s going to sink in,” he reassured him. “And we’ll all still be here.”

“You’d say that,” Tony claimed, his tone hollow. “You’ve said that before.”

Chapter End Notes

If you thought finding Tony was the culmination of this story, you're in for a wake-up call.

It's barely even starting and we're on an alien roller coaster ride from here on out.

Thank you to everyone who has attempted and succeeded the riddles so far and also to everyone who commented. We really, really appreciate hearing your thoughts on the story.

For this chapter's Easter Egg we have some concept art of a scene from the chapter.
If you want to get the most out of this one, it might be worth downloading the image file and taking a closer look at the metadata. As with everything else in this fic, nothing is ever quite what it seems...
“Are we good to go?” Steve leaned against the wall, rubbing the grime off his shield.

Rhodes had stopped in the doorway, physically blocking the exit. Tony was out of sight.

“Errm…” Rhodes started in a tone that was everything but promising. His lips pulled into a grimace as he put it across to the rest of the team. “We’re still a little… confused back there.”

“Confused?”

“He thinks he’s having visions as opposed to us being real, yeah.”

Bruce stood on tiptoe to peer over Rhodes' shoulder at a crumpled-looking Tony. He was staring at them with that same wary, bloodshot stare, huddled on top of a crate. His pupils were like saucers, his clothes half-rotting off his bony frame. His expression held a twisted mixture of anxious and vacant like he wasn't fully processing what he was seeing in front of him but he was scared anyway. He was close to unrecognizable. A wholly different man from the one the public lamented every year on May the sixth.

Steve groaned in frustration. “Are you kidding me? We don’t have time for this. Take him and let’s go.”

“Look,” Bruce raised a hand. “We need to approach this carefully or we could make it worse. If he's not able to trust his own reality then it's going to be difficult to…”

As if on cue the sound of metal grating dislodging resonated and the four of them stormed in unison through the doorway. Traumatized or not, Tony was evidently still Tony enough to not give a shit about other people’s opinions.

“I can’t believe-” Steve's face was one of total exasperation as he looked around the empty room. Bruce was singularly impressed that Tony had managed to scramble away like a rat up the proverbial drainpipe with only one arm. While Bruce was trying to work out how he'd managed it, the Captain's galled tone cut through the silence and brought him back to the here and now. “Natasha!”

“On it!” And gone she was through the ventilation shaft Tony had made his impulsive exit through, swallowed up by the murky darkness of the crawlspace.

Rhodes pulled up the map, making a guess at where the two might come out again. Unfortunately none of them were versed in alien architecture and War Machine had only logged the paths they’d physically used so far. It was anyone's guess how many branching points actually existed within the ventilation systems.

But Captain America was already hustling with Rhodes tight on his heels and Bruce found himself left in the lurch while the rest of the team had apparently decided to join in a big game of catch-me-if-you-can with someone who'd been presumed dead not five minutes ago.

By the time Bruce had caught up the setting was as follows: Captain America was holding down a thrashing Tony’s legs while Black Widow had an elbow firmly lodged in the crook of his neck and War Machine pleaded the case for reality. Tony didn’t look like he was particularly sold on the idea,
but there was only so much he could do with all of his remaining limbs pinned against the floor.

“Christ, let him go!” Bruce snapped and instantly turned into the new focus point. Even Tony stalled his wrestling momentarily. He’d obviously not counted on support from this side, hallucination or not. Natasha let up on the headlock enough to refrain from crushing his windpipe. Cap still looked like he wanted to bend Tony’s knee over backwards, but Bruce suspected that was partly due to the bloody nose Steve hadn’t been sporting a moment ago, but was now showcasing in addition to a grubby footprint on his chest.

Rhodes, meanwhile, was making a pass at the good cop approach. “Tony, pal, I need you on your best behavior here. No more stunts like that, ok?”

Crushed between the floor and Natasha’s grip Tony gurgled, “I just want to go back to sleep. You’re not real.”

“For crying out loud, can you please let him go?” Bruce tried again, imploring to Natasha's sense of restraint.

Natasha exchanged an uncertain look with Steve before they both reluctantly crawled off Tony. He scrambled to his feet and shot them all a baleful look, muttering about how even his hallucinations were out to get him. Bruce got his first close up look at the tattered fabric which hung loosely where his left arm ended and he squinted, trying to figure out how much of the limb was missing.

Rhodes was clearly thinking along similar lines, staring in the same direction. They exchanged brief glances as Tony stalked off ahead.

“How bad?” Rhodes asked him tersely.

“No idea,” Bruce answered truthfully. He watched Tony's gait, half shuffling, half staggering, the way he occasionally stopped and hissed, rubbing at his calves, or bracing himself against the wall for support. “Mentally, physically... I honestly don't know what we're dealing with. Next time we stop somewhere quietly, I'll try and get a decent look at him.”

“I'd appreciate that,” Rhodes said, his expression tight and worried. Bruce almost wanted to reflexly snap that he wasn't doing it as a personal favor to the Lieutenant-Colonel, but that was more his irritable bias against members of the armed forces than anything else, given his previous experiences with that particular profession. Rhodes was actually one of the more pleasant military men he'd encountered in his time. It was transparent how much he cared about his friend and Bruce found that a very redeemable quality.

“At least we found him, right?”

It had taken a fair bit of coaxing on Rhodes’ part to get Tony to accompany them even in the general direction of the hangar. They set out in silent single file. Natasha first, Bruce stepping aside for Steve and Rhodes, taking up the rear, the team following in Tony's footsteps to avoid his various booby traps and triggers. Bruce could hardly suppress his curiosity at the inventiveness of the home security system that Tony had rigged for himself and several times he almost lost his footing while craning his neck to get a better look at some particularly clever contraptions.

But he was the only member of the team who seemed to be finding any kind of silver lining in the situation, with Rhodes furrowing his brow in concern, Cap looking ready to attack his own shadow and Natasha glumly contemplative. Everyone seemed a little dumbstruck at the events of the last five minutes.
For his part, Tony was projecting the air of someone who was humoring his own delusions, rather than genuinely accepting that he suddenly had four new companions. This was evident in the fact that he kept suddenly trying to cant off in other directions, stopping wordlessly to tinker or tweak various door mechanisms or fuse boxes and occasionally looking shocked when he bumped into one of them after stopping abruptly.

He'd pinched Bruce hard on the arm at one point, looking at him curiously, which the doctor decided to take as a good sign. And really, it was infinitely preferable to the miniature taser Tony had used on him while they’d worked together on the helicarrier prior to the Chitauri attack. He wasn't sure he still had as tight a lid on the other guy as he'd had four years ago and a deserted spaceship wasn't the place to start testing his stress tolerance. He could only feel thankful that the occupants of the ship were, at least apparently, all dead.

As they approached the bay, Bruce found himself hoping that all the systems would have miraculously gone back online, that the lockdown would be somehow circumvented, that the door would be open and the shuttle would be sat there and all they’d have to do would be walk Tony onto the craft, take him safely home and send a SHIELD clean-up crew to tow the Chitauri ship into orbit. It was a scenario so vivid he could almost taste it. They deserved a win, an easy break after everything, he bargained with his more rational pessimism. He allowed himself a small surge of hope as they rounded the corner.

Of course the fucking doors were still locked.

“Shuttle's beyond there,” Steve nodded to the thick re-enforced steel. “So if you've got any ideas for getting this open, we're all ears, Stark.”

Tony rubbed at his face like an overtired kid, hours past bedtime. “There’s nothing there,” he declared with an air of irascibility, as if deep down he’d maybe allowed himself to believe in the idea for a second, but had caught them red-handed at their deception. “That hangar’s empty. Corpse-land.”

He was running his hand over the steel surface, as though testing out whether the lockdown at least was real. Bruce noted the way his hand occasionally spasmed and shook, the way he opened and closed his grip, like he wasn't quite used to moving his fingers anymore. He looked simultaneously exhausted and wired, like he was set to run a marathon and collapse all at the same time.

Tony gave a sweeping glance at the assembled crew. “Yeah, so I’m not hiking over to Main Deck for nothing. Party’s over, guys. T’was fun while it lasted.” He tapped a finger to his head. “See ya all next time.” Picking up the bundle of spare parts he’d scavenged on the way, he turned and sauntered off. Again.

“No...” Natasha's voice held a barely restrained frustration. Bruce could sympathize a little, seeing how she'd been lumped with the job of physically herding Tony back to the group every time he took a detour, which was practically every two minutes. Bruce was also starting to become seriously concerned that there might be another factor at play. His differential diagnosis was essentially that either Tony's mental state was shot to Hell or he was strung out on a pretty heavy dose of questionable substances. Maybe a little bit of column A, a little bit of column B.

“The shuttle is behind there,” Steve repeated, blocking Tony’s route back and pointing again at the door. “That's were we landed.”

“Huh...” Tony had gone on to inspecting Captain America’s chest, trailing a finger across the star emblem on his uniform, pinching curiously at the fabric. “Very elaborate... quite outdid myself this time, I think.” He leaned in even closer, sniffing slowly, before scrunching up his face. “Ugh, still
smells like dead Chitauri though. What a turn-off.” Giving Steve a consoling pat Tony stepped to the side and around, lingering for just a moment as he brooded over… something.

“I still say we blast the door open,” Rhodes muttered in light of the rapidly deteriorating situation. “Would save us a Hell of a lot of time.”

Tony turned to War Machine then, a little dazed. “Is this some kind of allegation about me frittering away the thirty-two pods during the mess hall incident? Because those were altogether different circumstances. And we all know how that ended, right?” Faced with a row of blank expressions looking back at him Tony mercifully elaborated, a teacher tested for the limits of his patience by some particularly dense pupils. “No muscling through the lockdown.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow, wondering what the Hell kind of incident had happened in the mess hall. At least Tony wasn’t supporting the frankly suicidal idea of trying to blast through the hangar doors.

Rhodey called after him, equally bewildered. “Where are you going?”

“Where you can’t come!” Tony called back over his shoulder. “To bed.”

Natasha sighed in resignation. “I’ll get him…”

“Hang on a second,” Rhodes said. “Why don’t we follow him instead? If there’s any chance Jarvis is still up and running, we’ve got it made. We can message SHIELD through him, have them ship a big-ass crowbar per express delivery…”

“That’s… actually a really good idea,” Bruce agreed, although Steve shot a dark look which strongly hinted that he considered their endeavors to have officially crossed over into ‘waste of time’ territory. Bruce gave him a look. “Well we were going to explore the ship anyway, right?”

“Right,” Cap responded, somewhat less than cheerfully. “I just didn't count on playing follow-the-leader with someone who thinks I'm not real.”

“Relax, Steve, he probably just thinks you're too good to be true,” Natasha shot over her shoulder with a smirk.

They all made off in the same direction as Tony. The spaceship was freezing cold and Bruce really regretted not wearing more layers. War Machine was most likely heated and really cozy, Cap and Natasha probably had suits with special thermal properties and Tony looked like he might be too high to care about trivial things like temperature.

That reminded him. He caught up alongside Tony. “So hey, ah…” He dodged a low hanging live wire and paused for a moment on how best to word it. There seemed to be only a finite number of ways how to make it sound not awkward. “By any chance did you happen to take a shitload of drugs?” Probably not the most eloquent approach, but it was out there now. “I’m trying to work out how much of this-” He gestured vaguely at Tony's general presence. “-is pharmaceutical.”

Tony stared back with a somewhat confounded expression, as though utterly thrown for a loop by the question. Bruce held his breath, hoping for some kind of sudden lucidity.

“I hope all of this-” Tony gestured just as vaguely back at the Avengers. His gaze was still slightly unfocused, like he was deliberately refusing to look too long at any one of them. “-is pharmaceutical. And I hope it has a pharmaceutical fix, too, cause this is getting weird as shit.”

For the rest of the journey they got the silent treatment from Tony, who was clearly still trying his hand at the ignore-them-and-they’ll-go-away technique, risking occasional glances over his shoulder
and sighing exasperatedly when he found the four of them still present.

They utilized mainly Chitauri-free corridors, suggesting that Tony had cleared at least a few main connective routes of the bodies and was using them on a semi-regular basis. Which did not equate to it being anything of an easy undertaking though. The further they advanced the more booby traps they had to sidestep, a task that might not pose a challenge for more nimble team members, like Natasha, but left Rhodes swearing aloud within his layers of armor whenever he had to hurdle some of Tony’s more extravagant contraptions. Bruce was rather proud of himself for how coordinated he’d managed to remain and felt quite satisfied with his progress keeping up with the others until Natasha looked back and shot him a worried glance that was tinged with obvious pity. Bruce’s momentary flash of confidence collapsed like a deflating balloon.

They caught up with Tony as he tinkered with what looked like a biometric scanner next to a set of double doors and he gave them an evil look as if they were trying to catch a glimpse of his PIN number.

Then the doors opened to reveal the chaotic dystopian castaway space laboratory that Bruce hadn’t realized had been missing from his life until this very moment. Alien tech was littered everywhere, with parts of Iron Man chassis scattered around, seemingly at random.

Cap looked nakedly horrified as he glanced around the room, before his gaze settled awkwardly on a container full of some unnamed yellow liquid, which Bruce thought was probably... definitely... piss, but there was no reason to point it out. Rhodes had an expression of frank, unabashed concern as he scrutinized the home made wall art, an arc reactor in extra large, painted in a now familiar lurid shade of alien blood. Natasha made a concerted effort not to touch anything. The smell of death was less pervasive in here, replaced with a heady mix of chemicals, battery acid and a faint hint of vomit and body odor which, in the context that they found it in, was actually reassuringly human.

Tony rushed past them, dropping what was left of his Chitauri rig as he went.

“Jarl, I’m fucked!”

“I’m detecting increased heat signature,” came an unmistakable British accent from seemingly everywhere at once.

“I knew it,” Tony said, making a beeline to where he had been synthesizing… Bruce wasn’t sure exactly what. Tony Stark was probably the only man who could get stranded on a plague ship in space, lose an arm and still manage to set up a distillery. Although to be fair, it looked more like an intergalactic meth lab.

“I’m running a fever,” was Tony’s conclusion to his AI’s findings. He touched his palm against his forehead, wincing slightly. “A real bad one, J.” He then began pouring dubious looking substances from one container to another, with a routine that made sense only to him. “We’re cutting this cycle short,” he announced and Bruce couldn’t help but wonder what ‘cycle’ was a designation for.

“You can deal with the symptoms while I’m sleeping,” Tony told his AI.

“Your temperature is within the normal range, sir;” Jarvis continued patiently. “The increment appears to be due to the additional sources identified. Four, to be precise.”

Tony’s head shot up and there was genuine horror in his voice as he stared disbelieving at the lineup of Avengers.

“What?”
Welcome to Fort Stark.

Well...not quite. You'll have to find it first...

There's something **MISSING**
where does he go?

http://bit.ly/????????

As always, thank you so much to everyone who's following, commenting and leaving kudos. We both appreciate it so much and we love hearing your thoughts! <3
Bruce went over to where Iron Man was strapped down onto a workbench, a cluster of tubes snaking out of the half opened chassis. Had Tony been using it as a sort of stasis chamber? That must have been a Hell of a job getting the life support just right. Resisting the urge to start picking things up and examining them - you never touched another man's experiments, golden rule - he looked instead at some of the equations, many of which were scrawled on the wall in what again looked and smelled like dried Chitauri blood. A slow grin began to dawn across his face as he took in the calculations Tony had used to calibrate his equipment. It was a work of manic, desperate genius.

“Tony.” For once, Bruce was first to break the silence, beaming broadly. “Tony, this... this place is amazing.” The rest of the Avengers glowered at Bruce like he wasn’t supposed to encourage the town crazy, but really, what did they know?

Tony obviously struggled on how to react to that observation. He stared at Bruce blankly, a time-lapse portrait of a bombshell going off in his head.

Bruce’s smile froze.

He caught Rhodes’ eye and the other man rushed to Tony’s side. Together they managed to grab him just as he collapsed in a heap, his knees buckling from underneath him. Letting him down gently as a team effort, they propped him up against the nearby wall where he proceeded to draw his knees tightly up to his chest, shaking his head in a jerking, repetitive motion. His eyes were fixed straight ahead on nothing, his mouth moving but no coherent sound coming out.

“Is he having a seizure?” Rhodes hissed to Bruce, who shook his head.

“I think a panic attack,” he whispered back, before raising his voice a little. “Hey... Tony... can you breath for me? Deep breaths?”

Tony managed a few shallow gasps of air.

“IT's ok, bud. We've got you,” Rhodes added and between the two of them they started up a steady, soothing stream of reassurances, that everything was fine, that he was safe, that this was very much real and that it was a good thing. Rhodes had an arm on Tony's shoulder while Bruce fumbled in his backpack for bottled water. “You want a drink?”

Tony sniffed, and Bruce noticed the dried blood around one nostril, the way his lips were cracked and parched, his pale skin dried and flaky. He looked up at Bruce with a muddled expression and yanked the water bottle out of his hand, worrying at the cap with his teeth. He guzzled at it until he started choking, then he began to cough and retch.

“Alright, take it easy,” Bruce patted him on the back and exchanged another worried look with Rhodes. Steve and Natasha looked on with palpable discomfort but fortunately neither of them chose to get involved. The last thing that Tony needed right now was a crowd.

He stopped gagging, gulping down deep, desperate gasps of air. He was still opening and closing his mouth, but his shoulders had gone from uncontrolled shaking to a slightly scaled full-body tremble.

“You're... real?” When he eventually spoke, the words came out cracked and disbelieving. He had
the air of a man whose whole world had just been violently turned upside down in an instant. And he still couldn’t look them in the eye.

“We’re real,” Rhodes affirmed.

“How...?” Tony seemed reduced to monosyllables, but it was a start.

“I told you, pal,” Rhodes’ tone was cautiously gentle. “We got your SOS, tracked the signal to a general area and... well, here we are.”

Tony was clutching the half-empty bottle with white knuckles, a sort of semi-comprehension dawning on him. He still looked like he was internally spiraling but the vacant, hollow panic started to ebb.

“J...?” He shifted, a frog in the boiling pot. There was a sharp edge to his voice.

As though anticipating the question, Jarvis’ tone rang out, smooth and reassuring. “My voice recognition confirms the presence of Lieutenant-Colonel Rhodes and Doctor Banner.”

Bruce thought he detected an intonation in Jarvis’ voice that wasn't there in the version he was used to working with at Stark Industries. The AI sounded more... consoling, like it had evolved into a source of comfort in adaptation to Tony’s needs over the years, become a sort of anchor Tony could use to tell apart illusion from reality.

It was probably the companionship of his AI which meant that Tony had even a shred of sanity left. The prolonged isolation would have driven him completely over the edge long before now, without Jarvis.

“Ok... ok.” Tony was still eluded by complete sentences, but he seemed to be slowly coming out of his episode. Turning his attention to the bottle in his hand, he began to gulp down more of the water, barely more measured. His expression was rapt, as though it was the best thing he'd tasted in a long time. Bruce wondered when exactly that last time was that he'd had a drink of clean water. Judging by the color of the various liquids in his makeshift distillery, not recently.

Tony was sucking the last drops from the bottle, startling slightly when the plastic began to pop and warp under his grip. Rhodes made an attempt to take it out of his hand, but Tony pulled it close to his chest, like they were trying to bereave him of his only life-line. “Alright, you hold on to it for now, no problem,” Rhodes yielded and that seemed to pacify Tony at least momentarily.

He sniffed again and Bruce noted with a good deal of concern that fresh blood was mingling with the snot clotting up in Tony’s beard. His jugular still pumped a jackhammer pulse, despite the situation now steadily deescalating. Tony licked at his lips; his face contorted in rapid, involuntary movements, the same way his fingers opened and closed around the empty bottle, in what Bruce suspected was just the icing on the cake of nervous tics that had heaped up over time.

“Tony, if it's alright with you, it might not hurt to let me take a look at you.” He glanced around the room somewhat apologetically. “No offense, Jarvis. I'm sure you've been doing a great job up until now.”

Tony, however, seemed fixed on processing the slew of implications. He was spluttering, half words, half wheezes.

“I can... I’m not... this is...”

“You’re going home, man,” Rhodes spelled it out and patted him reassuringly on the shoulder. Tony
reached out to touch War Machine’s plating, which turned out a little awkwardly since he was still
doggedly clinging to that bottle. Bruce picked up on how he kept his left arm pressed snug to his
torso; guarded, out of harm’s way.

“Why don’t you let Dr Banner check on you real quick?” Rhodes suggested, exchanging another
glance with Bruce. “So we can be on our way. Is that ok?”

Bruce gestured to a slightly more secluded area branching off to the side of the main room,
suspecting that Tony wouldn’t exactly want an audience for his first doctor’s visit in over four years.

Tony was strung for words but he let Rhodes help him to his feet and they shepherded him off into
the side room, where they parked him on a bench that Bruce quickly decluttered with a broad swipe
of his arm. Tony seemed placid enough, content for the moment with his empty bottle, so Bruce
turned to Rhodes.

“Give me a minute alone with him.” Rhodes seemed everything but thrilled at the idea of letting
Tony out of his sight so Bruce added hastily, “Could you check in with Jarvis meanwhile? The
sooner we can get help the better.”

That seemed to do the trick, because if there was one thing they could all unanimously agree on it
was that spending a minute longer than absolutely necessary on this ship was against anyone’s
interests, especially Tony’s.

“I’ll be right outside if you need me, yeah, pal?” Rhodes promised, eliciting a subtle nod from Tony,
which Bruce considered a win in the ongoing struggle to make him interact with reality.

Secluded from the others, Bruce squatted down near Tony, who was perched uncertainly on his low
bench.

“This is probably really overwhelming,” he started out with the understatement of the century, trying
his best to look and sound calmer than he actually felt. He thought about offering Tony another bottle
of water, but they were locked down on a ship with no plan as of yet for how they were going to get
back to their shuttle and conserving their rations in case of an emergency might be more prudent than
using them to bribe a traumatized Tony into compliance. Besides, water seemed to be a luxury item
around here.

Tony was alternating between glancing at Bruce and craning his neck to peer around the corner
where the others waited, obviously still trying to come to terms with what was happening.

“If you have any injuries, or anything that needs seen to straight away, I’ve got a med kit with me,”
Bruce offered.

“I, uh... no,” Tony stammered, bringing up a hand to the nape of his neck, flinching when he
touched the bottle against his skin. He stared at it for a few odd moments, as if just having realized
that he’d been holding on to it all this time. Carefully, he lowered it down on the bench next to him.
“I just... I need a moment, I think.” Exhaustion crept into the void torn open by his anxiety attack. He
was trying to compensate, but it was a scramble. “I’m not even properly... awake and... this was a
cycle interruption... and I thought... I didn’t...”

He trailed off, looking down at himself with a mix of horror and disgust, a creeping self-
consciousness breaching the surface, as though he was suddenly overcome with humiliation at Bruce
seeing him in his bedraggled state. He pulled down on the sleeve of his shirt before wiping
reflexively at his nose, frowning slightly at the blood that smeared his fingers.
Bruce had plenty of experience dealing with people who were in various states of illness and trauma, but this whole situation, the visceral reality of the state that Tony was in, was really stretching his ability to keep a neutral expression. Although the fact that Tony was even talking to him, interacting with him in semi-coherent sentences was a huge step in the right direction. He reached into his bag and offered Tony a tissue for his bloody nose. Tony took it with all the awe of a little kid being handed its first ice cream cone, but continued to stare dumbly at it until Bruce demonstrated the motion and he replicated it hesitantly, bringing up the hanky to his nose.

“This isn’t what you think it is.” Tony suddenly launched into defense, his pitch climbing. “It was necessary. All of it.” He made a wild, helpless motion. “There wasn’t any other way.”

“It's alright,” Bruce reassured him. “Whatever it is, you won't get any judgment from me. You kept yourself alive and that's really the only important thing right now.”

Bruce wondered how exactly he had been doing just that. Drugs seemed to be a given at this stage, although what he'd had access to on the ship was a worry, seeing how it was going to be impossible to predict the effects of whatever was in his system now, let alone start considering any potential long term repercussions. There was also the apparent question of nutrition, but judging by the equipment set up outside Tony must have found a somewhat sustainable workaround for that. Bruce made a mental note to put further investigation into that once things calmed down a little. There were more pressing concerns right now.

“Maybe you could start by filling me in on these cycles?”

“Cycles? Cycles…” The muscles in Tony’s jaw kept fluttering. He was chasing a focus that seemed to elude him. The commentary came in scraps and jittery gesticulation. “Long term sleep sedation. Alternating waking periods. Jarvis monitors, adjusts. But this, the last one, it was... it was a... uh...”

“Unintended?” Bruce offered.


Bruce thought back to the Iron Man suit he'd seen hooked up to what looked like life support. Well that certainly explained why he was so out of it, and why he was wandering around the ship wearing a Chitauri exoskeleton. It was a huge relief to know that at least some of Tony's current presentation could be attributed to him having just woken up from extended sedation. It was also, he reflected to himself, very impressive that he'd managed to pull it off safely, and under less than ideal circumstances.

“The plan was to go back to sleep once I was done with the repairs,” Tony explained. “Fall back into schedule. Let Jarv sort out the formalities. I don’t do well on big hits. I get all wired, twitchy…” He gestured loosely at the main room, where the others stood out of sight. “Head tripping.”

“Going back to sleep isn’t a good idea,” Bruce countered calmly. “Once we fix the lockdown, we're taking you home. Properly home, back to Earth.” He hesitated for a moment. “Back to Pepper.”

Tony flinched slightly, but it was the extent of his reaction to the mention of Pepper. Bruce opened his mouth to interpret, but, as if on cue to crack the delicate silence that was settling Rhodes poked his head in, carrying a set of clothes which had been rustled up from various spare items the team had on them.

“Here’s a welcome back present, Tones. Can’t go for the victory ride in your wrinkled shirt, man. What will your fans think?” He set the clothes on a box and retreated with a wink, leaving Tony to
stare down at his current wardrobe, which hung half-rotten and grimy from his body, patched up and sullied in various dubious looking substances.

He began to scrape absentmindedly at the wrapping covering his stump and Bruce kept his mouth shut for a few minutes, not wanting to seem like he was pushing the issue. Eventually he pointed to the clothes before gesturing to the filthy top that Tony was wearing.

“Would you mind if I stayed?” he asked tentatively. The weight loss and apparent muscle atrophy were all too obvious, even with his clothes masking what was no doubt the worst of it, but Bruce was more concerned about what else he might be hiding. “If you want some privacy, that's fine too, but I'd like to get a proper look at you, see if there's anything I can do to help.”

Tony hesitated briefly, then just shrugged, tugging at the collar of his shirt to pull it off. It became quickly evident that even tasks as mundane as undressing were made markedly more difficult in the immediate aftermath of the prolonged stasis periods he’d undergone.

And of course there was the elephant in the room, Tony’s left arm which was wrapped up in cloth from the elbow down to where it ended in a stump, a few inches above where his wrist should have been.

In a few long seconds, Bruce took in his restless, skittish form, arms and legs riddled with track marks from injection sites. At a glance, he was certain of undernutrition, serious vitamin D deficiency and, frankly, he wouldn't be surprised if there was a touch of scurvy at work. It was as bad, if not worse, than anything he'd seen in Kolkata, and that was really saying something. Tony's skin was a sickly almost-grey color, starved of natural light, and his arms and ribcage were mottled with several scars from wounds that looked to have healed badly. Probably another side effect of the catabolysis, although Bruce suspected some of them had become infected before they eventually scarred over. He wondered how many had been inflicted by the Chitauri before they were wiped out.

Tony cleared his throat. “Pass me the spares, would you?”

Bruce didn't comply immediately. “Would you mind if I took a look at your arm first? And I can patch up the worst of those too.” He nodded to a number of far more recent, ugly, angry looking pressure sores and ischaemic ulcers littering the skin overlying his too-prominent hip bones and shoulders. Iron Man wasn't designed to be used as a stasis suit and humans weren't designed to lie in one position for months at a time. Each and every time Tony woke up must have been a special kind of agony, he reflected grimly.

“There’s not a lot to look at,” Tony said, but began to unwrap the dressing on his arm anyway. “You’re a bit late to do much about it,” he added in a reproachful undertone, but it seemed more of a defensive move than a personal attack on Bruce.

“May I?” Bruce waited for a nod before he took the stump of Tony's left arm in both hands, checking the range of movement in the joint. A below the elbow amputation; at least he'd recover some function with a prosthesis. The stump itself felt like a clean break but the overlying skin was a mass of lumpy scar tissue from where the end had been cauterized. He winced a little as the extent of the wound told its own story.

“How did...?” he blurted out loud before he could stop himself. He cleared his throat and shook his head. “Sorry. Time and place. You don't have to talk about it if you don't want to.”

“Maybe later, ok?” Tony replied tersely. Rather understandably, he did not seem to be in a conductive state for suddenly pouring his heart out. He pulled his arm away from Bruce, commencing to wrap it back up and effectively putting a lid on the topic.
“You wanted to look at the other nicks too, didn’t you? It’s not very warm so maybe you could hurry.”

“Right. Of course. Sorry.” Bruce grabbed some small dressings and disinfectant and began patching up the worst of the pressure sores as best he could. It wasn’t ideal, but it was better than letting them get infected and, by the looks of Tony's scars, he'd had enough experience with that.

He passed Tony the clothes when he was finished and looked at him uncertainly. Bruce was in no doubt that Jarvis was giving him a run-down on his physical condition at regular intervals and he probably wouldn’t welcome a detailed explanation of how fucked he was. So instead of rattling off a list of ailments, he went to pat Tony awkwardly on the shoulder, thought better of it at the last minute and shoved his hands back in his pockets.

“I'm glad you're alive,” he said eventually, his voice quiet.

And again, it was Rhodes who came to his aid, hollering from the other end of the room in an equal mix of dread and admiration:

“Dude, is that a freaking nuclear warhead in your broom closet?!”

Chapter End Notes

Chapter Five is here, for some Christmas cheer!

Just kidding, it's bleak unrelenting misery all the way. Did you expect anything less from us?

There's no puzzle this week but for the second part of our tour around Fort Stark, we present Tony's Altar of the Arc, by Chaed.
We'll be updating as normal over the festive period, so see you at the beginning of 2018 for Chapter 6. And thank you so much to everyone who's been with us and commenting so far - you have no idea how happy it makes us when you stop by and leave your thoughts. <3
Chapter 6

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“You ready for this, buddy?”

It feels like the top climb on a launch track, the chain lift clicking through its last cogs before the brakes disengage. Full speed down the dive drop, heart between teeth, putting Six Flags’ roller coasters to shame.

How he’s supposed to fall asleep with his pulse beyond measuring range is anyone’s guess.

Together, Jarvis and Tony are going through systems check on the HUD. The programmed drug delivery system is in place, modified to include several crude cannulas. Not pretty, nothing is here, but they’re patent and that’s all that matters.

The main one is in his neck. Placing them all was a special kind of hell but better to have more backups than they need. They can’t risk losing venous access. It’s the only thing that they can’t automate. They perfected the algorithm beforehand, Jarvis calculated the dosages. Jarvis will be watching over him. For once, he will be the one running the diagnostics on Tony’s system and not the other way around.

Power supply is at one-hundred percent. Car battery turned alien wall socket. AfPak, cower in infamy.

The feeder sticks, still grates his throat with every swallow, but he’ll learn to live with it. He hasn’t come so far to die from starvation in his sleep.

Jarvis vouches for enough nutriment to get them through round one with reserves for the wake-up party.

“Ok.” Cold sweat on his palms. He tries to snuggle into Iron Man’s embrace like it’s his Kluft mattress back in Malibu, not a metal coffin in some derelict corner of the galaxy.

“Hit me, J.”

He wants to welcome the haze thinking of something pleasant, like the warmth of California sun, or maybe the tobacco and vanilla of a good Cabernet.

Jarvis spells ‘Sweet Dreams’ on the HUD.

He doesn’t remember much else.

Jesus Christ.

How much had he had to drink last night? Did he pass out in the suit?

But no, this is way worse than any beer fear he’s ever experienced. His mouth feels as though something has crawled in it and died, and there’s a churning deep in his stomach, hunger pangs after a late-night work binge.

He smacks his lips, slides his tongue around slack tissue and when enough motor control is restored,
he attempts swallowing. He chokes, an obstruction at the back of his throat. A reflexive sniff; one nostril blocked, a foreign body sensation. He winces as he tries to snort it out; it feels like pulling off a band-aid and chickening out halfway through.

“J...?”

Opening his eyes seems like the natural next step, but even that turns out to be anything but pleasant.

A familiar screen flickers to life, and he attempts to blink away its brightness.

“Hey... where...”

“Welcome back, sir.” Jarvis’ voice coos through the speakers. Tony waits for the customary catalog. Time, temperature, wind conditions. Maybe he’ll take the board out for a surf later.

He reaches out for Pepper... only to realize he can’t lift his arm.

It comes in bouts, jumbled scraps of memory and dream, a straight blow to the system.

“Sir, your pulse,” Jarvis calls to attention. “May I suggest slow, deep breaths.”

There it is, his heartbeat thumping. Bounding against the barrier of his eardrums. The wide eyed panic of the kid who loses his mother at the fair.

He needs to know. “…home?”

“Still a long way off, sir.” Jarvis’ tone is soothing, no wry edges. “We were unable to complete the sleep cycle.”

Whatever bubble of hysteria has threatened to burst now ebbs into something duller. Maybe Jarvis has a hand in it, because Tony can’t find the conviction to freak out. It’s more like a sense of disappointment, but even that he can’t fully wrap his head around.

“It’s cold,” he settles for instead. His teeth chatter.

“Disturbances in thermoregulation following deep sleep sedation are to be expected. Increasing skin surface warmers.”

He rolls the question on his tongue before committing to it. “How long did we make it?”

“One month,” Jarvis says. And after a pause, “I’m sorry, sir.”

For Tony, the space odyssey compartmentalized into five categories. Subjugation, which encompassed everything in the early days. The Great Purge, in which he had turned himself from slave to master. Dive Loop, where he had been torn between ebullient hope and racking misery. The Final Cut (off-limits, taboo, verboten) and, still pending: Salvation, in whichever way it would come in the end.

That it would materialize in the form of three Avengers and War Machine losing their shit over a nuke that was supposed to obliterate New York four years ago was beyond even Tony’s wildest speculations. And he’d been coming up with a number of pipe dreams, a full range from comical to prophetic.

“It’s a dud,” he told them cynically, knocking against the hull and maybe getting a kick out of the look of unabashed horror on Captain America’s face. No man left behind, his ass. Tony’d had four
long years to replay that moment, the faint crackle as their glorious leader ordered Natasha to shut the portal because he couldn't curb his fucking enthusiasm for the thirty seconds it would have taken for Iron Man to make it back through.

He'd calculated every possible permutation of those events. In his mind, on what passed for paper around here, scrawled on the goddamn floor in his own vomit. Jarvis had eventually started refusing to run the simulation. But thirty seconds were all it would have taken. Tony was free from doubt. He had a way with numbers.

What he didn't have was time for Steve Rogers to clutch his pearls over a nuclear warhead. His sensibilities hadn't been so delicate when he'd sentenced Tony to death.

“And you just kept it right next to where you sleep?” Natasha was eyeing him with a sort of open-mouthed incredulity. Like she would have done so much better picking a show floor for it. Like it mattered if it blew next to his pillow or three hallways away. He’d been surprised to find that the Chitauri had even bothered to reel the thing in at all, as big and ugly as this nose cone was.

The best part was, really, that the nuke being a washout meant that everything, all of it, from scratching the steel surface of Stark Tower on his ascent past the Milky Way to manually disimpacting his bowels in between cycles, had been a complete waste of time. The outcome would have been exactly the same, regardless. The doomsday machine wouldn't have exploded, the portal would have closed and it wouldn't have made a single difference which side of it he’d ended up on.

“Because that’s the upshot of the sim, J,” he muttered. "And we both know it.”

Rhodey was staring at him like he was only now catching on. Everyone was slowly catching on. They seemed deeply upset, gave him belittling glances. No surprise when he was the class clown who chose to lay down on the wire when he could have cut it. Standing ovations to Captain America for getting into his head and making him feel like shit for being a pragmatist. For goading him into some pointless heroics and then leaving him high and dry.

Steve gave him the horse appraisal. “Is he... uh...” He looked uncomfortable, as though he was floundering for a way to phrase ‘not batshit mental’.

“Yeah, how are you doing, Tones?” Rhodey was at least more inclined to speak directly to him, rather than over his head.

“Better. I think,” he said guardedly. Despite Jarvis’ plea for authenticity, Tony decided the jury was still out on whether they were actually there. If he was hallucinating in these proportions, chances were he’d made up Jarvis’ guarantee too.

He stared at them some more, blinking a few times. Steve's shield glinted in the overhead light. Once. Twice. Three times. Every time Steve breathed in, the shield shifted slightly in the light. It was distracting. It was like a Christmas LED show.

He moved to where Iron Man lay on the workbench, busying himself with the technical service the suit required after every cycle, glancing at the team from behind a row of drainage tubes. “I’m going to give you the benefit of doubt for now and try to wrap my head around how you’re all apparently suicidal enough to board a Chitauri mothership.”

Speaking of suicide, it was time to eat.

“A Chitauri-free mothership,” Rhodey corrected as he took, albeit a little hesitantly, a container full of slosh that Tony handed him. It didn’t fall through his hands or otherwise end up on the floor,
which Tony took as a promising sign, partly because that meant Rhodey stood a genuine chance of not being a fata morgana and partly because it spared him the extra trip to the mess hall in the event of the jug spilling its contents on Tony’s could-be new pants. They bunched around the ankles and the fabric itched. The shirt was worse. Like he’d stepped onto an anthill or something. Bugs all over his skin. And that fucking shield kept glinting, in sync with Steve’s noisy breaths.

Tony marched over to Captain America and put his palm flat on his chest. “Could you stop that, please?” he asked with all urgency and sincerity. The bastard had the gall to pretend he didn’t know what Tony was talking about. He was probably doing it on purpose. Nobody could breathe that loud and not know they were doing it.

“Uh, Tony?” Rhodey was giving the slurry a light shake. Oh right. That. Tony pondered, then instructed him to pass it on to Steve - an offer at redemption - who in turn had to off-load it in the storage area, where Tony gave it a thorough pat-down before settling for a satisfied nod. If tripping balls equated to grunt work getting done, he was not protesting.

If it just wasn’t for that maddening itch. He’d have to get an angle with his nails, satisfy it.

Rhodey, hovering around him like a fretful mother-hen, pointed to the container they’d just moved. “Please tell me that wasn’t the portable lavatory. That stuff looked vile.”

Tony raised an eyebrow. “The shit bucket? Hell no. This is what I eat.”

“You’re not serious,” Natasha wrinkled her nose in visible disgust.

Steve, for his part, just seemed relieved that he hadn’t been handed a container full of human feces.

“Is that just food?” Bruce was a little bit more accepting of Tony’s adopted dietary idiosyncrasies. “Or does it have anything added to it?” He was also still trying to scope out what exactly Tony had been taking by way of a pep-me-up. Best of luck on that one.

“I wish it had add-ons,” Tony admitted wistfully. The stuff tasted like sawdust moldering in the rain. He patted his stomach for emphasis. “Keeps a trim waistline though.”

“Mama Rhodes will fatten you back up,” Rhodey promised. “Your plate better be licked clean when she clears the table.”

Mama Rhodes had it coming then. Tony had an elbow-length list of foodporn cravings he needed satisfied. But then Captain America stepped up, putting a lid on Tony’s building foodgasm. He wasn’t the one on a four year dry spell when it came to cheeseburgers.

“This is all great but we need to talk about getting back to the shuttle.”

Alright for him to focus on getting out. Suddenly much more urgent when he was the one stuck on the Death Star.

“Tony, can we use Jarvis to get a word out to SHIELD?” Natasha asked, earning her a long hard look. She could have said no. That she was going to wait. She could have waited. Thirty seconds were all it would have taken.

“Uh, no?” Tony said. It was tedious, having to spell everything out for them. He scratched some more. “The lockdown, remember? As in all systems locked down, including comms.”

“You mentioned the Main Deck,” Steve said. “Where’s that? Can we countermand it from there?”
“Maybe?” Tony remained deliberately vague. He’d have to find and fix the reason for the short first. And then theoretically and with a spoonful of luck he could reboot the systems manually. Which was all well and good if not for one unfortunate fact: “I’m not going there on just a hunch.”

Bruce cleared his throat, earning him a warning look from Natasha, which he took with a wince but continued anyway. “We might have an idea what caused it.”

“Does it matter what caused it? Will that change how we fix it?” Natasha snapped tersely. “Surely we should be focusing on getting out of here, not doing a post-mortem on the electronics.”

“Natasha,” Steve sighed. “Just show him what it was you used. Maybe he knows how to fix whatever that thing did.”

Bruce looked extremely doubtful at this statement and Natasha looked positively murderous, which only added in sparking Tony’s curiosity. Up until now he’d assumed that Jarvis had jump-started the cycle because of a run-of-the-mill malfunction. But no, Miss ‘Totally Spies’ was reshuffling the pack.

She produced the flash drive sized device from her pocket, which Tony promptly snatched from her hands.

“It was just probing the system a little. It wasn’t designed to fry the whole thing.” Natasha was laying on the excuses. Oh no, she couldn’t have possibly waited. It had to be closed, right then and there.

Tony gave the gadget a once-over before taking the slot head and jamming the plastic casing apart.

“Just probing, huh?”

He held up the electronic innards before throwing them reproachfully at her feet. There wasn’t as much as a crack of shame in her put-on, but Tony knew better. Natasha Romanoff always had a trick up her sleeve.

His fingers tightened around the homemade screwdriver. How lovely that’d look sticking out of her face. She could match eye-patches with Fury.


To her credit, she didn’t react to Tony's tirade other than to shift her stance to an alert one when he raised his hand to jab a finger in her direction. Natasha was nothing if not cool under pressure. The Ice Queen.

“Whoa there, easy.” Rhodey was between them, a steel intermediary. “We’re all in the same boat here, pal. Nobody wants to pick your pockets. Relax.”

“No. You don’t get it,” Tony barked back, appalled by his ignorance. Hadn’t he been there when Natashalie had infiltrated SI? This was the same thing, a deja-vu, a catch-22. “No matter how often she sheds her skin, a snake’s still a snake.”

For fuck's sake, if he could just stop that fucking crawling. Why did they give him the wet shirt? He dug his nails in harder.

“Tony, that's enough,” Bruce murmured, a quiet warning. Of course he was sticking up for her. Even Banner wasn't immune to thinking with his dick and she was... Tony looked down in faint
surprise. The doctor was gently disentangling his hand from where it was clutched around the skin of his stump. So that was where the wetness was coming from, he realized, rubbing at the blood on his fingertips. “That’s enough,” Bruce repeated and Tony couldn’t work out why he looked so sad, given that he was obviously just scoring brownie points with the Widow.

Anyway.

Work to do. Tony traded the tool for War Machine’s collar then, dragging a startled Rhodey over to where his own suit was. Popping off the sync cover on both armors he hooked a line from Iron Man to War Machine.

“Jarvis, use his projector. Give me a glitch list.”

“Initiating malfunction analysis,” Jarvis confirmed. A 3D render of the ship appeared at eye-level, displaying circuit diagrams and network links which Tony had laboriously authored over months of mapping out the place, co-opting the craft’s entire electronics systems for his own survival. Even with external comms clearly disabled, Jarvis was still able to hook him up with their equivalent of a LAN party.

“Calculation complete,” Jarvis announced and pretty much everything this side of the gun ports flashed in red. Some parts were outright missing, gaps where nodes and hubs should be, but it gave him enough of an overview to realize that the current status was Fucked. With a capital F.

“Explain it,” Tony demanded, glowering at Natasha, feeling his left eye twitch.

“I was collecting data for SHIELD,” Natasha countered. “We didn’t even know you were alive at that point.”

“Don’t play dumb!” he seethed. The insinuation!

“I’m not-”

“You know exactly what I’m talking about. That’s not a hard-drive, it’s a mini EMP.”


“She frizzed half my grid, I’m mad as a hornet. I could have died!”

Was this what purgatory looked like? Trapped on an alien ghost ship with the also-ran Avengers lineup for company? And where was Thor? Why did he get the booze and virgins over in Valhalla while Tony was stuck in Chitauri cemetery?

“Bud, shift down a gear,” Rhodey said, his tone firmer than before.

“Look, the main thing is, how do we fix it?” Steve held a hand up like a teacher refereeing a playground spat. He gestured to the schematics. “I have no idea what most of this means, but it sounds like we need to get out to wherever we need to go and get this sorted.”

He made it sound so very simple.

“How far is it?” Rhodes was looking at Tony, but Jarvis fielded the question, perhaps anticipating another outburst.

“Distance wise, twenty-five miles on multiple levels, almost the entire length of the ship,” the AI relayed calmly. “On our last excursion, it took approximately forty-seven hours, including rerouting
due to unforeseen encounters.”

“That’s not exactly a Sunday stroll,” Rhodey admitted.

Natasha was already doing the math. “If we start right away and properly ration…”

“Hello!” Tony called everyone back out of their air castles. He was getting fed up with being overruled on his own ship. “One does not simply walk into Mordor.”

Steve, still stuck in the roaring forties, furrowed a brow. “What?”

Rhodey made an attempt to throw light on modern day pop-culture. “It’s—

“-a really stupid idea,” Tony finished for him. This wasn’t the time or place for a literary debate on milestones in fantasy prose. “Did anyone listen when I said I’m not going?”

“Can’t we just go for you?” Bruce asked with the innocence of a lamb. “I completely understand if you’re not up for the trek, but maybe you could give me a crash course in how the systems work and I could try to fix it while you wait here.” He looked somewhat hopeful at the idea, as though he wanted nothing more than the chance to tinker with some alien tech. Tony would have to keep an eye on that. If he was getting home, these were his spoils of war. Nobody else's.

Steve clearly didn't see the issue either. “Right, we escort the doc, sort the... whatever out and we pick you up on the way back to the shuttle.”

“If I may.” Jarvis cut in as the voice of reason again. “I believe the issue is not the distance but rather the other occupants of the ship.”

“Wait.” Natasha raised an eyebrow. “I thought the Chitauri were all dead.”

Right, because as a rule people who were on their own, lost in space, the sole survivors on a dead plague ship totally put a shitload of time and energy into booby trapping the entrance to their living quarters. Definitely not actions of a man with some seriously problematic neighbors or anything.

Captain IQ seemed to twig before anyone else did. He looked at Tony questioningly. “So maybe before we make any plans, you mind filling us in on what exactly happened?”

An epiphany went around the room. Tony decided to give a voice-over.

“It started with my half-baked decision to carry a nuke into space…”

Which hadn’t blown, stranding him on the other end of the galaxy with a last lungful of New York smog and an alien armada that had been everything but happy to be cut off from their voyage of conquest. They’d kept Tony as a booby prize, prompting two months of captivity that made Afghanistan look like a weekend retreat.

“...at which point, I might have accidentally triggered a genocide...”

He'd been sick as a dog. Genuinely, gut-wrenchingly lousy. Coughing and sneezing and shivering, throwing up bile and shitting liquid and curling up in a ball while clutching his insides and wanting to die. Patient zero of an outbreak of a perfectly human opportunistic infection which ended up wiping out the whole fucking lot of them, War of the Worlds style.

It had been a pyrrhic victory, all things considered.

“Uh... Tony?” Rhodey made an inquisitive gesture.
Tony looked back in confusion. Was he talking Klingon, or what? It wasn't that hard to follow. He was laying it out in his best prose. Rhodey wasn't normally this stupid, but apparently today was the exception.

“Did you, uh... want to finish that sentence?”

“What sentence?” Tony’s fingers found the shirt again. He bet it was some cheap wholesale deal. It sure didn’t feel like all cotton. Never. Tony knew quality fabric when he touched it.

“You were saying about getting sick,” Bruce prompted.

Oh. It had become less important to him whether he was speaking out loud or not. It wasn’t like there had been anyone to listen. Apart from J. Speaking of J, where were they on that simulation?

“Which simulation, sir?” See, Jarvis could basically read his mind.

“You tell me. You're the one running it.” He shook his head. Jarvis was probably losing it a bit, stuck up here for so long. No internet. No stimulation while Tony slept it out.

“Tony.” Rhodey was getting antsy. He made a ‘get to the point’ motion with his hand. It was a good story, Tony had to admit that. It didn’t do to leave them with such a cliffhanger.

“Yeah... so I rode it out, the flu, right? Reunited with Jarvis, set sail for the home port and for a while all was good in the world. Until I realized I wasn’t the sole tenant of the place.” He raised the stump, and the material flopped uselessly over the shortened limb. He’d have to do something about that. Maybe tape it down before it got caught somewhere. It sure was irritating. They were all wearing clean clothes and they'd decided to give him the blood-stained shirt. Said a lot for his place on the team, really.

“I'm guessing that whatever pathogen took out the Chitauri didn't quite have the desired effect on the rest of their... specimens? Prisoners? Guests?” Bruce surmised, filling in the blanks that should have been self-explanatory.

“War pets,” Tony offered helpfully.

“Worse than Chitauri?” Natasha asked, staring openly at Tony's arm, as though the stump itself was a potential threat.

“The heavy-hitters I locked away,” Tony explained. “This side of the Main Deck there’s only vermin, middle-class, mostly tame. Nothing’s made a move against me for a while, so I guess we’ve reached a delicate equilibrium. Which I’d like to keep that way, if it’s at all possible.”

“Is there no way around this?” Cap was asking. “Can’t we avoid your ‘neighbors’? And still override the lockdown?”

“I’d need to reboot the main systems if you want to open the shutters. There’d be a couple minutes leeway, where electronic door mechanisms don’t work. Which would be bad news if the creepers get a taste of freedom. Honestly?” He gave them all a sweeping look. “I don’t think the odds weigh out. Doesn’t SHIELD have some kind of backup plan in case this mission goes balls up?”

Since he presumed that Cap and Widow at least were actually important. SHIELD could probably care less about War Machine and the Hulk, but that was fine. The three of them could just have a boy's night. Steve and Natasha could braid each other's hair and bitch about him all they wanted.

Poker, maybe. Tony didn't have cards but Chitauri blood made awesome paint. He had some
somewhere that hadn't rotted yet. It was distinctly less awesome when it rotted. Still, make do and mend.

Four doubtful faces stared back at him.

“Nobody mentioned a backup plan to me,” Bruce murmured, somewhat mournfully. Cap shook his head in agreement.

“The military think I’m on leave,” Rhodey confirmed. “This shit is so top secret that even the brass don’t know I’m up here.”

Natasha was the only one who seemed genuinely rattled at the question. “This is an ‘if we don’t hear from you by X date, we’ll assume you’re dead’ kind of deal. It's safe to say that SHIELD aren’t going to send backup. We're their first and last line of offense on this one.”

“Can I guess who came up with that crackpot idea?” Tony was covering his eye and giving them Fury’s signature glower. “So he sent the whole Avengers roster plus one Air Force slacker-” He looked at Rhodey apologetically. “-no offence there, Jim, to pull a sci-fi heist on a Chitauri flagship vessel?” Either Fury had concocted the mission while being schnockered or common sense had vanished from Earth in the years Tony had been gone. “What’d you do if this place was teeming with irate aliens? And where’s your Norse buttress? Fury kick him off the team?”

Just about everyone in the room looked markedly uncomfortable at the mention of Thor. Rhodey grimaced. “How about I give you the recap on that over a pint of lager when we get back home?”

Valhalla. Called it.

“Bottom line is, we get this sorted ourselves or not at all,” Natasha said. “So pack your bag and let’s get going.”

Tony put his hands up. “Slow your horses, lady. Let’s not set out on the Death March before I’ve had my wake-up coffee, ok? Give me some time to wipe the morning from my eyes and...” He gestured to the pieces of Chitauri rig discarded on the floor. “Give this thing a patch job. You did quite a number on it.”

“Hang on.” Bruce was giving him a vaguely concerned look. “I'm worried about you getting back into that exoskeleton with those pressure sores. That thing looks filthy. Actually, I'm not massively happy with you coming along for the ride at all because, to be perfectly honest, the only place you should be going is a hospital bed.”

Tony looked around for anyone else who might have held the fort on an alien slaughtership but came up empty. He raised an eyebrow at Bruce. Seriously now?

Bruce shot him a regretful look. “Maybe you can take the Iron Man suit at least? We're barely out of Earth's atmosphere. This is the home stretch. You don't need a makeshift stasis chamber any more.”

“We could do with the backup firepower, too,” Rhodey added. “Assuming your suit is still combat ready?”

Tony looked away and busied himself going over some of the equations scrawled on the walls. The crossed out and scribbled over ones were particularly riveting. A litany of frustration, of things that had been tried and failed, ideas that had never taken flight. Of days when he’d been manic and out of his mind and throwing variables around with increasing gloom, of days when there was the trace of please-let-this-work wishful thinking that had ended in abrupt defeat, and often despair. It was all laid out, if you knew where to look for it.
Iron Man, hooked up to tubes and cables like a terminally ill patient had been his greatest success when it came to cannibalising Chitauri tech and undeniably the only reason he was still alive. Retrofitting it was going to be a backbreaker. It had taken him months to metamorphose it; it would need more than a snap of his fingers to get it back to previous standard.

But what he was far more concerned about was the way Natasha ran her hands feverishly over the weapons strapped to her waist, the way that the shield in Cap's hands twitched every time a hiss came from the overhead pipes. Even Rhodey was tense, out for blood, shifting his weight from foot to foot until he was almost bouncing on the spot. The group was a powder keg waiting to erupt. And they were treating him like he was the live wire.

He almost called for Jarvis again.

Didn't they have prep work to do on the next cycle? Surely it was time to go back to sleep. He suddenly yearned for the inside of his suit, the reassuring moment in between the fear and the blackness, just at that sweet spot where the drugs flooded his system and carried him off in a gentle wave of calm. It was the only thing that really felt much like hope anymore, even if it was only chemically induced.

Maybe when he woke up next, this wouldn't be his problem anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Happy New Year, and welcome to Tony's inner monologue.

You may or may not be aware, but in the Summer of 2016, a Chitauri warship was found just outside of Earth's orbit and was recovered by the Strategic Homeland Intervention, Enforcement and Logistics Division of the US Government. It was picked apart by their forensics team as they attempted to piece together exactly what events had taken place aboard that doomed ship.

Today we can give you a glimpse at one of the many pieces of evidence they kept on file.

Keep it to yourself though, ok?
This wasn't quite the Tony he remembered, Rhodey reflected.

This wasn't even the Tony he remembered picking up from Afghanistan, rambling half-deliriously about the fist-sized hole in his chest. He thought he'd seen his best friend through his worst moments but evidently he was in for a disenchantment. Tony’s facial features, partially obscured by a mess of unkempt hair, were compulsively twitching, a litany of tics and spasms. A few times he was clearly trying to smile and seemed to have forgotten how. He was struggling to adjust his voice to the right volume, pitching either too loud or barely a whisper.

As he recounted his summary of what had happened since he'd first boarded the Chitauri ship, Rhodey was struck by the way he would miss words, or stare off blankly as he lost the trail of a sentence. Tony, who'd always had a smart ass answer for everything, seemed frequently inarticulate where he'd once been acid tongued. Rhodey desperately hoped that this was temporary.

There were enough hints and flashes of the old Tony, sure enough. A wryness that even four years of isolation couldn't quite suppress. But he looked unsound, overwhelmed and anxious. The effect was even more pronounced in those moments where he tried to make a quip and it didn't quite land.

Rhodey decided to focus on the practical. If there was one thing that was guaranteed to bring Tony out of his own head it was an engineering project, and they had a hell of a job on their hands if Iron Man needed to be refitted from a life support machine to a battle-ready suit of armor.

He tried not to think about the ugly question of whether Tony should even be entering a potential combat situation in the state he was in right now.

“The suit,” he said, gesturing to both Iron Man and War Machine. “You can have whatever parts you need to get yourself up and running, just don't leave me without any weapons.”

“Can I help?” Banner was already peering owlishly at Tony's equations and staring with unguarded fascination at the interior of Iron Man. Rhodey strongly suspected that his question was more of an earnest request than an offer.

Tony looked at them both with a startled, disbelieving expression, before positioning himself in front of his suit indicatively, as though guarding it from anyone trying to violate his sanctuary.

“Let’s all take a step back, yeah? This is very delicate engineering, ok? You can’t just do an oil change and send it off into Armageddon.”

Banner flushed guiltily, obviously embarrassed at having been caught overstepping some kind of boundary, and stepped away from the chassis as though it were on fire.

Tony made a vague sweep at the vials that were hooked up to various parts of the suit. “I need all of that. A cycle has to be properly initiated, sustained. You can’t just skip the protocols. I need to run the checks first, adjust the dosage…” He rubbed at one blood encrusted nostril. “…eat, maybe. Don’t wear me down before we’re even out the door.”
Rhodey exchanged a worried glance with Banner, both at the unchecked irritability in Tony's voice and the mention of dosage, which strongly implied that he was starting his day with more than Froot Loops.

“Alright, we'll slow it down. You go at your own speed.” Rhodey's tone was measured, but he was painfully aware of the need to get moving. Having a sleepover in Tony Stark's alien den wasn't why they were here and the sooner they were off this ship the better.

Tony started gathering an armful of supplies; tubes, grease, slosh, flush, syringes, shooting occasional uncomfortable glances at the rest of the group. Evidently he wasn't adjusting well to having company. He had to double back for the right container, ask Jarvis twice on the amount he had to dispense and in the end looked a little lost on where to follow through on whatever he was about to do.

He shot Romanoff a glare and gave Banner and Rhodey a warning that came across as more of a desperate plea. “Don’t touch anything, ok? I’ll only be a minute.” He frowned for a second, then turned questioningly to Banner. “Any chance I could snitch another tissue?”

The doctor obliged and Tony vanished off to a small alcove, armed with his bundle of supplies. Everyone stood mutely, exchanging uncomfortable glances. Romanoff looked impatient, Banner guilty and Rogers seemed miles away with a completely unfathomable expression on his face, like something was simultaneously angering and troubling him.

The sound of loud gagging and choking came from the neighboring annex. Romanoff wrinkled her nose in a way that could almost be comical if you ignored the circumstances.

“I'll go check on him,” Rhodey said eventually, letting loose an uneasy sigh. This wasn't anything close to what he'd envisaged all the times he'd run through the fantasy of finding Tony in his mind.

Banner shook his head. “I'll go. I think I have an idea of what he's trying to do.”

Rhodey nodded in assent but followed the doctor anyway, reluctant to let Tony out of his sight for too long.

“Tony?” Banner moved like he was approaching a rabid animal. “Need a hand in here?”

His back turned to them, Tony dunked a tube into grease and took a couple semi-deep breaths. His hands were visibly shaking, the tissue crumpled in a ball in his trembling fist. Banner didn't back off and so Rhodey continued to hover in the doorway, watching his friend choke and retch as he tried to force the tube down his nose.

“Fu…” Tony coughed, waving his left arm at the intruders. He sniffled, snot and blood running from one nostril. “Get out!”

The doc seemed less fazed as he examined Tony's set up. “You're trying to NG tube yourself?” He gestured to the brown slop in the container from earlier. “Is this stuff really that bad?”

Rhodey thought ‘that bad’ seemed like a wildly inadequate understatement. He was fairly certain that the open container was at least partially responsible for the fact that the immediate vicinity smelled like rotting meat and something indescribably awful. He'd smelled better corpses.
So he stared in a sort of open mouthed horror as Banner dipped his finger into the container and stuck it in his mouth. Tony looked at him with a similar incredulous expression, like he’d committed a crime by trying to actually eat the goo. A moment later, the doctor was (predictably) dry-heaving and spluttering, his eyes watering.

When Banner could eventually speak, he sounded like he was half choked. Rhodey hoped he was imagining the fact that he looked a little green. “That's fucking awful.”

“You can’t eat it like that,” Tony cleared up rather redundantly as Banner pulled a series of distressed faces. “It’s digestible. But you have to keep it down first.” He held up the grimy tube and Rhodey winced at the sight, not to mention the miserable expression on Tony's face. He hated the fact that somehow this was how his friend had ended up living.

“Feeder’s the only way,” Tony admitted. “I’m just a little…” Disgusted with the ritual? Rhodey couldn’t blame him. “I'm not used to an audience.” He pointed to the waiting container of slosh. “But I can’t go on an empty tank. And Cap out there doesn’t look like he’s gonna share his girl scout cookies with me. So give me a minute here, ok?”

“It's not that anyone's holding out on you as far as food's concerned,” Banner began explaining patiently. “It's just that I’m not sure if your digestive system can even handle solid food after four years of, um...” He gestured to the brown substance. “…this. We can give you something to eat, but honestly, it might just make you sick.”

Rhodey realized it hadn't even occurred to him to offer. Tony had seemed so completely mired in his own strange, entirely alien routine that the thought of reaching into his pack and handing him a snack hadn't even crossed his mind. The more time they spent in this den watching Tony struggle to twitch and spasm his way through any kind of human interaction, the harder it was to even recall an image of the guy he'd known half a decade ago, to picture this new version of him as being capable of any kind of normality. He felt a sudden urge to intercede on Tony's behalf.

“Doc, not to contradict you but,” Rhodey nodded at the ‘food’. “If he can digest that he can handle a biscuit.”

“A biscuit...” Tony repeated almost dreamily. He set the tube down slowly, a rapt expression on his face, like he didn’t seem entirely with them. “What brand are they? How many could I have? What else did you bring? I’ll swap you. You can have everything. Take it all. Just let me taste again.”

Banner shot Rhodey a glare. “No, seriously, you don't understand what…”

“Come on,” Rhodey clapped the doctor on the shoulder and had already produced a chocolate protein bar from his pack. The look of pure, undiluted want on Tony's face was extremely difficult to say no to.

“Chocolate fudge,” he shared with a conspiratorial grin, handing it to the practically salivating castaway. “US army's finest. Better than this alien shit any day.”

“Chocolate fudge.” Tony didn’t seem able to do anything but parrot monosyllabically, lightheaded at the prospect of real food. He took the bar from Rhodey with a hypnotized expression, letting his fingers run longingly over the packaging. A moan escaped his lips. He looked up at Rhodey and mouthed a silent ‘thank you’.

“Dig in, bud,” Rhodey encouraged. “No more crash dieting.”
Tony brought it to his lips, holding it there experimentally for a few moments, before he took the thing and wolfed it down in three desperate gulps.

It came right back up, half chewed, never even getting as far as his stomach. Rhodey watched in dismay as Tony unleashed a stream of bile and chocolate colored chunks, splattering the floor and the hem of Banner's pants in the process. Evidently the man was more used to the sight and smell of vomit than Rhodey was, because he didn't particularly flinch.

He stared at the pile of sick on the floor and Tony, who was moaning and convulsing with his stomach's own efforts to violently empty itself. Banner, mercifully, didn't seem to be the I-told-you-so type.

"Could you pass me some water?" he asked mildly instead and Rhodey produced another bottle from his bag. Mentally, he tried to count up how they were doing in terms of supplies. If this mission dragged out, he didn't particularly want them to all end up drinking recycled piss and eating whatever the fuck Tony had been surviving on.

When Tony managed to stop choking, Banner lifted the water to his lips, while Rhodey, at a loss, put a steadying hand on his shoulder. "Slow sips," Banner was warning him, refusing to hand over the bottle, presumably to stop Tony from downing the whole lot and throwing it up again.

Rhodey looked a little desperately at Banner. "We'll find something else, right Doc?"

"Take a moment," Banner withdrew the water bottle, apparently much to Tony's dismay, and handed it back. "It's fine," he told Rhodey, all reassurance and calm, which was actually fairly impressive given that he was standing there with sick on his pants. "Throwing up isn't going to kill him. And you know… at least he tried."

"Yeah. Worth a shot, right?" Rhodey said doubtfully. Neither of them really believed it, but there was no point in recriminations now.

"I'm going to help you place the NG tube now." Banner was quiet but firm as he picked up the tubing and gently pushed a resigned Tony down to sit against the makeshift workbench. Rhodey looked away when Tony started gagging, but it was all over within about ten seconds. They helped him pour the brown slop into a makeshift feeding bag and hooked it up to the tube. It wasn't pretty but clearly it was getting the job done.

The bag seemed to take an eternity to drain through the tube and Rhodey filled the silence by talking desperately to distract Tony from what was obviously an unpleasant process, filling him in on anything that popped into his head from who was president now to this new steakhouse that had opened up a few blocks from Stark Tower that he was going to love once he was back on solid food. When they were done, Tony yanked the tube out himself in an obviously practised motion, made a face and swallowed a few times experimentally.

"Alright, we good here?" Rhodey tried to sound more chipper than he felt. "Ready to get your suit up and running?"

Retrofitting Iron Man was more than an elementary school science project. Tony had unhooked a
gauntlet and some of Iron Man’s wiry innards that were now provisionally attached to his own body and provided Jarvis with whatever data the AI needed to fine-tune his drug regimen.

Despite starting to show the characteristics of a guy who was riding the rails, Tony seemed a lot more animated than before, drilling Rhodey with questions about NFL statistics, the perks of Kopi Luwak coffee that clocked in at some five-hundred bucks a pound and which Tony swore he could not live another day without and various half-coherent daydreams and ideas of his that were hard to follow for anyone not currently savoring an alien high.

Sitting in the middle of the equivalent of a LEGO kit for adults Tony was mercilessly cannibalizing both suits.

“This linear actuator's wrecked,” Banner, who was sat cross legged on the floor, held up a part for Tony's inspection. “Swap it out with one of these DC motors?”

Tony looked less than happy. “Too much torque, not enough angular velocity.”

“Got anything better?” Banner was already rummaging around through near-identical looking parts which were piling up in what seemed to be a fairly haphazard way.

Tony launched into an impassioned half-lecture, half-rant on robotics, which lead to him and Banner having something that was halfway between an argument and an incomprehensible tangent-filled excuse to geek out. In between, Tony took to ordering Cap around for the grunt work and was generally inclined to take suggestions only from Jarvis, who seemed to have plenty experience when it came to reining in his creator during the ‘waking phase’ of a cycle.

This, in turn, led to Banner launching into another lengthy discussion, this time with Jarvis, which might as well have been in Chinese for all Rhodey understood of it; something about half lives and pharmaceutical properties of various alien substances, which Tony began to animatedly chime in to with increasingly indignant rebuttals to whatever it was that the doctor was objecting to. Ultimately, Jarvis seemed to put Banner's mind at rest, with him eventually letting it drop and Jarvis initiating some protocol that they referred to as ‘Good Morning’.

“This should keep things at an equilibrium for at least the next six to eight hours,” Jarvis was saying. “After that, sir, you may begin to experience some withdrawal symptoms but I can monitor these from the suit and calculate a dosage accordingly.”

“Looks like someone's checking into rehab when we get back,” Rhodey teased. “The tabloids are gonna have a field day.”

“As long as it’ll keep me from trying to take the space whale for a walk again,” Tony was reminding his AI, insinuating that withdrawal symptoms weren’t really an exception to the rule. “You work your magic, Jarv.”

Rogers stepped forward to carefully sound out that statement. “Wait, what? Is that a figure of speech, or are you trying to say there’s a Leviathan on board?” The twenty that had made it to Earth through the portal had caused colossal damage; it had taken the army’s biggest guns and a Hulk to take them out, and even that had drawn out over months, claiming lives by the hundreds.

Being trapped with one on the vessel wasn’t raising anyone’s spirits.

Tony took it with a hang-loose attitude. “One’s still alive, yeah. There were four, but I unplugged
one by accident, and two died from starvation before I figured out what they were feeding on.” He shrugged nonchalantly, like he was talking about dog-sitting rather than intergalactic killing machines. “Fourth one was healthy as an ox last time I checked. I wanted to keep it for homecoming.” He winked knowingly at Rhodey. “Would have been the coolest comeback ever. Fury would have shat his pants, watching me tie it up in front of the Saloon. Maybe I could still do it.” He seemed to give this serious thought. “How big did you say your ship was? Could we tow it off?”

Rogers looked as though the vessel on his temple might burst as he eyed Tony incredulously. “I watched a lot of men die because of those things,” he said with a quiet intensity. “Firefighters, first responders, good men who laid their lives down to protect the city.”

“He's joking,” Rhodey intervened hastily. “You're joking, right Tones?”

“Ship’s not big enough to tow it anyway,” Banner added, completely deadpan. Rhodey wasn't quite sure if he was throwing some sass into the mix or if he was seriously trying to calculate what it would take to haul a giant whale through space. It was often very difficult to tell these things where he was concerned.

“It's not something to joke about,” Rogers insisted, his face utterly stony. “Fallen soldiers are never something to joke about.”

“Relax, trooper,” Tony said, waving about his homemade screwdriver before resting it on his chest. “And the star-spangled banner in triumph shall wave, o’er the land of the free and the home of the brave! I listen to the hymn every night before going to bed. Ain’t I the textbook patriot, J?”

“Incontestably, sir,” Jarvis offered patiently.

“There you go. Look what war bounty I’m bringing home, all for good ol’ merica. Cut me some slack. I risked life and limb for my country.” The innuendo wasn’t lost on them, but Tony had already moved on. “Hey, Jarvis, lil’ jump-start?”

Iron Man’s eye slits flickered weakly, netting a fist to the chest plate and some choice expletives from Tony. It was far from the delicate engineering he’d heralded earlier, but it got the job done. Electronics, hydraulics and mechanical parts began to hum in accordance.

“Booting…” Jarvis said. “Running Essential diagnostics. Life support… ON. Motion control… ON. Flight systems… LIMITED. Combat functions… LIMITED.”

“What about my ghetto blaster?” Tony wanted to know.

“Portable stereo… OPERATIVE.”

“Swell,” Tony quipped. “Roadtrip entertainment’s sorted.”

“Are you taking requests?” Romanoff asked with a slight smirk. It was probably the closest she was going to get to an olive branch.

Clearly the 'Good Morning' protocol was starting to take full effect, because Tony seemed to be much less twitchy and much more perky than before. The dogged, anxious look from earlier was replaced with a slightly erratic ebullience which did not seem entirely healthy, but seeing him crack jokes was infinitely preferable to watching him miserably try to force feed himself.
At least he'd managed to get emergency-repairs done on the suit, which was proof that he was capable of following a logical thought process for more than five minutes. He was still straying, but at least it was a start.

But even with Iron Man semi-functional Rhodey had no desire to go charging out into the great unknown with a grand total of one and half operational suits, a super soldier and the KGB’s trump.

“We need to talk about what's out there.”

“Too right.” Romanoff sat down next to Rhodey, folding her long legs underneath herself. Even in downtime, she seemed to move with the careful stealth of a spider, like she'd been doing it so long that she didn't know how to turn it off.

Rogers looked like he was itching to get out of Fort Stark, which might have been at least partly due to a combination of his enhanced senses and the fact that the place now smelled of vomit on top of the host of other odors. He was still staring at Tony with an almost angry intensity, as though the man had done something to personally offend him. Maybe it was a drugs thing. Rogers certainly seemed like the black and white, 'just say no' type.

“Does Jarvis have any cool holograms of monsters to take a peek at?” Rhodey asked.

“No holograms,” Tony negated, taking his place at the campfire circle. “Couple vids, some selfies. Can I see the itinerary?”

Jarvis drafted the ship and charted a red dotted line from home base to their target on Main Deck. ETA punched in at 37h42m.

Tony squinted, mulling over the holo. “How about we reroute here? Cut that half circle. This is serviceable too. Shaves off a couple hours.”

Jarvis highlighted several issues with Tony’s suggestion. “You marked that path no-entry, sir. Among others.”

“Change of heart,” Tony announced. “War Machine can take the vermin.”

Rhodey was flattered, but he wasn’t an idiot. “Define vermin.”

“Venomous arthropods,” Jarvis disclosed. “Swarm intelligence, cataloged sizes range from twelve to forty-two inches, non-violent unless provoked.”

“Space bugs. They hate Heavy Metal,” Tony clarified. “We blast some Metallica, they stay in their vents. Mommy Shelob only ever comes out for funerals, so as long as we don’t touch her spawn we’re golden.”

“I don’t like it,” Steve said. “Avoidable risk factors.”

“You chickening out already?” Tony prodded. “This isn’t even the buy-in for the high roller bowl.”

“By taking this route,” Jarvis elaborated. “The chances of running into anything class F or above are an estimated thirty-five percent. An alternative route would lower those chances to twenty-eight-point-nine percent, but add an extra eight hours twenty-three minutes to the journey time, as it would
require circumventing the most likely high-activity area by taking the air vents via a detour to the engineering sub basement. However, I am unable to calculate the weight limit of these structures and thus cannot confirm the likely success of this approach.”

“Looks like its option A,” Banner muttered.

“Wait, what's class F?” Romanoff arched an eyebrow.

“The class of resident creature designated 'Fuck No' by Mr Stark,” Jarvis answered smoothly. Banner audibly choked at the AI cursing. There was clearly a first for everything. “I would like to point out that I did suggest several alternative systems of nomenclature.”

“Look, I'll take the thirty-five over a route where we don't even know if we're up against a dead end,” Rhodey said.

“I don't like it,” Romanoff countered. “I don't like any of it.”

“Neither do I,” Rogers agreed. “Jarvis, can you come up with any alternatives?”

“The alternative is that you wait here,” Tony answered instead. “And that I borrow all of War Machine’s ion thruster fuel and speed-run the game.”

“Sixty-seven percent chance of Class F or above encounters,” Jarvis calculated. “Am I adjusting for shortest route?”

“Hollywood or Bust, pal.”

“Sixteen hours twenty-one minutes,” Jarvis said.

“Deal!” Tony declared, elated. “We’ll take it.”

“No deal,” Rogers parried. “The objective here is to bring you home alive.”

“Besides,” Banner pointed out, “You have one arm.”

“I have taken that variable into my calculations,” Jarvis added. “Nevertheless, I cannot recommend this course of action.”

“It's obvious, isn't it?” Rhodey felt as though he were banging his head off a brick wall. “We take the route with the thirty-five percent chance of encounters but with a guaranteed A to B. The alternatives are either we're so over-cautious that we don't know if we can even get to where we need to go, or we let Tony go on an crack-fueled hara-kiri.”

“If they're out there, then we fight them.” Rogers announced.

“Terrific,” Tony summarized and clapped his hand against his thigh. “Bus for summer camp leaves in ten.”

They dispersed, with nobody looking particularly at ease with the situation, all of them running through their pack lists a last time. Tony caught up with Rhodey back at the suits, fitting Iron Man with a makeshift holdall.
He let the starter cables retract into War Machine, tapping at the Chitauri kill-list on the suit’s chest plate.

“You still trust me, right?” Tony asked, gesturing vaguely at himself. “Despite… all of this. You know I got your back, right?”

Rhodey was taken aback. He hadn't been expecting Tony to say anything close to that, not this version of Tony they'd found in a dark corner of space. It was the most heartening thing he'd heard come out of his friend's mouth since he'd burst out of that Chitauri exoskeleton.

“Always, pal,” he told him with absolute sincerity. “I've been in a lot of shitty situations but I've never been worried when it's us. We'll smash this, Tones.” He grinned at his friend. “Besides, depending on how you look at it, you've had my back this whole time. If it wasn't for your suit, I'd have been on the Chitauri breakfast menu several times over once the invasion hit.”

He pressed a button on the chassis and fingerprint recognition brought War Machine to life. Stepping inside, he felt the reassuring sensation of his suit enveloping him. It wasn't that he'd become dependent on it; he reckoned he could still hold his own if he had to, but he felt better for having it regardless.

In the end, it had taken several hours, but the team was finally ready to roll out. Tony Stark took point, decked out in red and gold with a slightly feverish expression on his face, his pupils the size of pinpricks as he let his faceplate snap shut.

A moment later, a private comm link crackled to life between War Machine and Iron Man.

“Jim, if I tell you to run, you’ll run, yeah?”

Rhodey didn't answer. Better to say nothing than to lie.

“Music?” Tony's voice was still in his ear, but this time he seemed to be talking to his AI.

“Private or speakers?” inquired Jarvis.

“Let ‘em know we’re coming. Maybe they’ll puss out.”

Rhodey was about to raise his own objections when Jarvis did it for him. “That's an unlikely potentiality, sir.”

“Right, be a grouch. You wanna step on a sleeping one again? Your memory chips failing you, or what? I don’t remember having success with the sneaky approach.”

Jarvis’ sigh of defeat was almost human.

So in the end, in the midst of an alien plague ship, with some rather jumpy superheroes in tow and a ship full of Christ alone knew what up ahead, Rhodey watched incredulously as their marooned friend began to strut along to one of the most famous guitar riffs in rock history.

On the HUD-to-HUD, Rhodey was treated to Tony’s fairly off-key warbling of a Black Sabbath classic.
“...now the time is here... for Iron Man to spread fear... vengeance from the grave...”

Chapter End Notes

Hello and welcome to chapter 7.

Rhodey could use a hand with some wiring, if you don't mind? There might be an easter egg in it for you...

And as always, thank you for reading and especially thank you so so much to everyone who leaves comments. We absolutely love reading your thoughts, reactions and speculations - you guys are awesome. <3
Chapter 8

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Bruce watched Tony stride out on ahead and looked skeptically at Rhodes’ iron mask. He opened his mouth to say something, but Tony was already out of the door and a moment later some kind of rock music was thrashing loudly through the corridor ahead.

He couldn’t help but wonder to himself if a sixty-five percent chance of a smooth trip was good enough odds. It wasn’t that he was particularly worried for his own safety. In terms of mortality, or lack thereof, he’d tested that hypothesis quite thoroughly already. He wasn’t going to get killed on this mission or any other. But there were always things that were scarier than death. Like, say, losing control, putting the others in danger, getting everyone around him killed and ending up the sole survivor on a damaged and broken alien spaceship.

Bruce tried to rein himself in. It would probably, maybe, be fine, wouldn’t it? Maybe he would be able to keep a lid on the Other Guy. Maybe this expedition would prove something. Maybe the others would even see him differently when this was over. Maybe Nat would be able to be alone in a room with him without positioning herself by the door and scoping out her exit strategies.

Maybe pigs would fly.

“Is he ok?” Steve hissed to Natasha, pointing to Iron Man up ahead. “I don't think he's ok. He seems way too...” The supersoldier spread his hands in a sort of perplexed gesture.

“Doped to the gills,” Black Widow stated the obvious under the blare of the music.

Meanwhile, War Machine was tempering the road trip spirit with some well placed concern. “Tony, you sure about this? Not that I don't appreciate your taste, but you're announcing our location to every thing-that-goes-bump-in-the-night on the whole damn ship.”

“Jim, my man.” Tony's voice sounded a little too euphoric. “Has my genius ever failed you?”

Iron Man waved an armored hand dismissively and carried on serenading along to the music. He'd muted the mic on his suit but they could still hear him from behind his faceplate. Bruce came to the conclusion that Tony Stark couldn't carry a tune in a bucket if his life depended on it. The whole thing was so wildly inappropriate, it was hard to believe that Tony had survived here for years, despite the glaringly obvious repercussions the entire ordeal had left on him, mentally and physically. Bruce only hoped that he knew what he was doing and that the local vermin was as intimidated by the noise as Tony claimed. Captain America certainly looked like he wished he'd packed earplugs.

They stopped short before a bolted door — a regular one, rather than one painted with foreboding obscenities — and Tony nodded his head towards Steve. “Hey muscle chick, want to put that physique to use?”

Steve huffed at the nickname and shot Tony an utterly filthy look, but as far as Bruce had worked out he wasn't generally one to pass up the chance to hit something, and he puffed his chest up as he began to slam the bolt on the door with his shield.

With the noise of vibranium on gradually giving metal, Cap's grunting, along with the blaring rock music that filled the corridor, Bruce removed his glasses and pinched the bridge of his nose with a sigh as a headache began to build behind his eyes.
He wasn’t sure what he’d pictured this mission to be, but a one-armed, doped-up Tony Stark rocking out to Guns N’ Roses in the middle of an alien ghost ship while an enhanced supersoldier angrily beat the shit out of a doorknob with a shield painted in the red, white and blue of patriotic freedom would certainly not have made his list of top ten probabilities that morning.

Eventually the door gave under Steve’s administrations and swung open to reveal something that made Cap’s face completely blanch in horror as he staggered back from the entrance. Since nothing jumped out to attack them there didn’t seem to be an immediate danger, and Bruce craned his neck out of curiosity, standing on his tiptoes to catch a glance of what was going on. He was much too short to see past Cap's broad shoulders, though.

“WILL YOU TURN THAT GARBAGE OFF?!” Steve, clearly rattled, yelled at the top of his voice over the sound of a particularly shredding guitar solo.

“What? What’d you say?” Tony was hooting over the music, pretending not hear anything. He was practically bouncing off the walls, clearly at the peak of his alien-stimulant induced high.

As Cap staggered back further, Bruce was able to get a glimpse around the corner of the door frame. The first thing that caught his eye was the presence of a blinking console on the back wall. Some kind of comms station, maybe, or a monitoring system for some aspect of the ship. He was itching to play with it, see exactly how it had been put together, but then he noticed what had horrified Steve so much.

Two Chitauri corpses, one eviscerated with some half-rotting guts hanging out, one with its skin, or exoskeleton, partially peeled off. It looked like they’d been deliberately taken apart, not with much care or finesse but with some kind of purpose which, in fairness, was not entirely clear from the mess.

“Whatever the Hell did this, we don't want to run into it,” Natasha said in a low voice.

“Agreed.” Steve looked positively green at the gory display in front of them and War Machine just nodded from the back row.

Bruce sidled up to Tony, whose attention was drawn to the nicks and scrapes Cap’s shield had left in the door rather than the killing field in front of them, as if flayed Chitauri was old news to him.

Bruce squinted suspiciously, shooting him a sideways glance. “You did that, didn’t you?” he muttered quietly, trying to keep the trace of mirth out of his voice.

He could hear Tony choking with laughter inside his suit.

Bruce grinned conspiratorially at Iron Man’s impassive face. He glanced back over his shoulder, but Cap was too busy looking like he was going to be sick to pay much attention to them and Natasha was all business, gingerly examining the corpses without getting too close, as if trying to figure out what they might be up against. War Machine hung back, and Bruce suspected that the lack of urgency meant that he and Tony had a private communication channel, or he'd figured it out himself.

Tony abandoned the door markings, popping back his face plate. “How about I show you something cool while our resident heroes continue to wet their pants?”

He dialed the music down a notch, much to the relief of everyone else present and the two of them walked over to the console dominating the room. Tony pointed to an Iron Man sized crater in its backside.

“So it turns out our cybernetic friends shared something of a hive mind,” he started. “These widgets
are all over the ship. Bio-organic routers. Hubs. I crashed into one accidentally the first time, and bibbidi-bobbidi-boo suddenly a dozen nasty Chitauri infantry collapsed around me. Digital lobotomy. Awesome, don’t you think?"

Bruce’s eyes lit up. “Intriguing,” he agreed. “Huge design flaw as far as neuromorphic enhancements go.”

“Definitely helped me out when I was trying to pass on the bird flu,” Tony elaborated. “One Chitauri down with a fever and its whole regimen would catch the sniffles. Alien domino effect.”

Bruce couldn’t stop himself from producing a modified Swiss army knife from his pocket and began to fiddle with the casing, prizing it open to reveal a chaotic jumble of chips and wiring and nodes in a configuration he’d never seen before. There was a rueful expression of longing on his face at not being able to take the whole thing home with him. He could happily hole himself up for a month with just this to keep him company.

“I suspected something like this.” He chewed his bottom lip. “I dissected a few — hope you don’t mind by the way, but Pepper’s been letting me use your labs — anyway, I found the neural implants but never figured out how the link was maintained. These consoles must either be really long range or exist in a portable format. I wish we’d known about these when we were fighting them all over the city. Taking whole units out at a time would have been a much more clean and elegant solution than smearing them across the walls of buildings.”

Tony wasn’t paying attention any more. He had his hands up halfway through Bruce’s monologue. “Hang on,” he said, an expression of confusion plastered on his face, the music now entirely muted. The tone in his voice had flipped from chatty to accusatory. “You’ve been playing with my toys? You’ve been hanging out with Pepper?”

“Woah.” Bruce took an instinctual step back. Apparently that had been the wrong thing to say. “Maybe let me start at the beginning on this one.”

But Tony had no such intention. Clearly unpleasantly surprised he jerked his head in the direction to where War Machine hovered around the crime scene and was following Steve’s and Natasha’s theories on whether the perpetrator of the massacre classified as one of Tony’s Class F monsters or not.

“Rhodey!” Tony called him over, motioning somewhat anxiously at Bruce. “Why has he been talking with Pepper?” He glared at Bruce in what was unmistakably a setting of territory boundaries. “What business has he got with Pepper?”

Rhodes let his own faceplate slide back and gave Tony a baffled look. “Banner’s been trying to find you, you idiot,” he said bluntly. “I mean, you don't think Pepper would seriously...” He gestured at Bruce, who gave him a half-hearted indignant scowl. Although, to be fair, it wasn't an inaccurate statement.

Faced with open skepticism on Tony’s part, Bruce decided to elaborate. “After New York, Pepper was... not ok. I'm sure you can imagine.” And that was putting it mildly. The media, SI, SHIELD, everyone had descended on her like vultures scoping out prey. “She asked for my help trying to track down where you might have gone. Tesseract... portal... gamma radiation?” He drew an imaginary triangle in the air. “Remember, I sort of know a bit about that?”

Bruce was genuinely perplexed that Tony would even think for a moment that there was anything untoward about this. “I kept trying. And kept trying. And in the meantime I sort of ended up helping out with R&D, just a bit here and there. Time passed and we still hadn't found you and Pepper didn't
want to give up and, well, to be honest, neither did I. And it was a good thing, because that's how we picked up your distress call.” He pointed lamely in Tony's vague direction. “And... um... ta-da. We found you.”

As far as alibis went Tony’s expression was pretty self-explanatory on what he thought about this one and Bruce found that extremely hurtful. He'd just put the last four years of his life on hold trying to help Pepper track Tony down, a time consuming, seemingly impossible task. Besides which, he was fairly certain that at least some of his R&D work had helped keep things afloat and bought Pepper some breathing room when Tony's absence had caused faltering shareholder confidence. A 'thank you' would have been nice but he would have honestly settled for Tony just maybe not implying that he was the sort of person who would bang someone's grieving widow before the dust had settled on his memorial plaque.

He contemplated saying something but the repeated mention of Pepper seemed to have set Tony on a different course. In the handful of hours they’d spent around him he hadn’t uttered her name once, yet he seemed obsessed with the topic now that it was out in the open.

“How is she?” Tony wanted to know. “Will she wait at the tarmac? What’d she say when she heard I was alive?” He looked at Rhodes like he was a magic 8-ball. “Does she have a new number? I’ve tried calling. She doesn’t pick up. What aren’t you telling me?”

“I don’t think she's getting your calls, man,” Rhodes delicately pointed out. “You're kind of out of network range.”

The airman sighed and Bruce braced himself for another difficult reaction, given what he knew Rhodes was about to say next. He cleared his throat. “She doesn't know about the SOS. We didn't tell her that there was a chance when we came out here. She'd just accepted that you were gone. It seemed too cruel to up her hopes when we didn't know for sure. Or at least, that was what Fury thought, and we all just went along with it. But you can be damn sure that she's waiting for you. I think a part of her always would be. She never moved on.”

Tony was markedly distraught at the revelation, his voice edgy when he spoke again. “You didn’t tell her,” he whispered. “She doesn’t know.”

“You’ll tell her yourself,” Rhodes offered. “After we’ve frisked you for lice and put you in a tux.”

The humor was lost on Tony as he made an attempt to brush a hand through his hair, but with Iron Man in place the gauntlet only bounced off the helmet. A thin line of sweat had formed on his forehead, despite the ambient temperature being everything but cozy. It was impossible to tell what exactly was going through his head, considering that most reflection processes seemed to be skewed by the unknown substances in his system.

Rhodes was about to give a second attempt to dissipate the situation when Steve and Natasha made their way over.

“We shouldn’t be staying any longer than absolutely necessary,” Steve was saying, nodding towards the Chitauri corpses.

Tony took it as a cue to let his faceplate pop back into place and sullenly stalked off ahead.

Well that had gone really fucking well, Bruce reflected to himself. “Did I do something...?” In spite of the fact that Tony was obviously mentally disoriented, he still looked to Rhodes for reassurance. If anyone knew Tony for sure, it was the Lieutenant-Colonel.
“Nah, don’t worry about it.” Rhodes shot him a conciliatory smile and Bruce accepted it gratefully. “He’s a gamecock when he’s sober; it just gets worse when he’s inebriated. Right now I’d guess he seems to be needing equal amounts cuddle blanket and a good old kick up the ass.”

“Hey Stark.”

Both Bruce and War Machine spun around with a start as Natasha's voice cut like a knife through the air. If he'd been expecting anything, it wasn’t for Nat of all people to go chasing after their resident prima donna.

She caught a dubious Iron Man by the gauntleted arm. “Christ knows why but there’s no accounting for taste. Those two idiots might have their feet in their mouths but know that your girl's still got eyes only for you,” she said with a small smile. “Couldn't help but eavesdrop. Sorry. Force of habit.”

Bruce had hoped for a moment that it would do the trick, that her reaching out to Tony might somehow be the moment where things clicked and they were all a team again. Iron Man’s scowl hid whatever cogs were turning in Tony’s head, but he pulled away from her touch, with some delay, as if it had just taken him that much longer to process how he wanted to react.

Before anyone could add anything debatably helpful, the air vent above them dislodged with an almighty clatter, bouncing off Tony’s suit and landing on the floor between him and Widow. This was followed by a loud, high pitched inhuman shriek - the kind of noise you’d expect to hear if a pasty child with too much eye shadow began crawling out of your TV set - as an arachnid creature emerged from the shadows and launched itself onto Iron Man’s shoulder.

A muffled squeal came from the armor’s mic as Tony struggled to get a hold on one of too many legs while Natasha withdrew her gun in a smooth fluid movement and blasted the thing into a million pieces a split second after Tony unlatched it from his body.

“No!” Tony yelped, waving around a now body-less insectoid appendage. “You killed it!”

Natasha just gave him a deadpan look as she wiped some splatter from her uniform. “Was he a friend of yours?”

Rhodes was poking at the remains with an armored boot. “Dude, that’s gross.”

Tony shoved the severed spider leg in their faces, livid. “Guess who pissed off the sucker’s parents now? FYI: The big ones-” He held a hand at waist level. “- come in venomous. Nasty stuff. Bullets don’t tickle ‘em.”

“Weren’t they supposed to be scared off by noise?” Steve rebuked, but didn’t seem particularly mournful at the prospect of maybe not having his eardrums abused by Tony’s grunge in the future.

Tony, for his part, looked like he would have crawled up the walls if he could have. “You don’t understand!” he kept insisting, not scrimping on theatricals. “This isn’t your friendly neighborhood spider.” He began to pace, jittery spasmodic moves. “Oh Jesus… oh fuck…”

Rhodes now furrowed a brow in concern. “Are we talking oh fuck as in oh ‘Fuck No’?”

Steve cut in, a note of tension in his voice. “Then, just a suggestion, maybe you should drop the dead alien limb and we’ll get moving before someone decides to come checking on their kids?”

It was only his superhuman reflexes, Bruce surmised, which saved him from being hit by aforementioned appendage as Tony flung it away in a high arc, turning on his heels and setting a savage pace for them to follow.
As they reluctantly set out after him, he could hear Natasha muttering to herself. Bruce took the opportunity to catch up with her. “It's not your fault,” he said. “You didn't know.”

“Damn right, it's not my fault,” Nat replied tersely. “I'm just doing my job here. And I'm not going to apologize for blasting a mutant spider the size of a fucking beagle. It landed directly on him, what the Hell was I supposed to do?”

“If it makes you feel any better.” Bruce smiled in commiseration. “I've just been chewed out for, as best I can guess, daring to look in Pepper's direction. Never mind the fact that it was all completely in the interests of trying to track him and bring him back home.”

Steve looked over his shoulder and raised an eyebrow. Dropping back to join them, he sighed. “This isn't good. I'm worried about his mental state.”

“That's an understatement,” Natasha groaned, nodding up ahead to where Rhodes seemed to be trying to placate his friend. “This whole thing is turning into way more risk than I'm comfortable with.”

“Look.” Bruce tried his best to see it from both sides, not liking the way the conversation was tipping. “Imagine being stuck here.” He gestured around him at the grim steel corridor. “For years. No human contact. Going from one day to the other, not knowing if it was going to be his last. It's clearly not been a picnic. He's lost an arm, for heaven's sake.”

“And developed a serious drug habit,” Steve countered. “I'm not saying he hasn't been through a lot. But that doesn't change the fact that he's a loose cannon. We're relying on him to guide us safely through this ship, but we don't even know if he's in touch with reality from one moment to the next.”

“But he's always been a loose cannon,” Natasha pointed out. “And he's not exactly a stranger to substance misuse either.”

Bruce hadn't been aware that Tony had ever, at least prior to his space odyssey, partaken in anything stronger than alcohol. Tabloid gossip wasn't something he particularly cared to keep up with, so he decided to stay out on this one, just shaking his head in vague disquiet.

“He's nothing like his father, that's for sure,” Steve murmured. It was easy to forget, looking at his youthful appearance, that he really was from a different era, a man out of time. “It's strange,” the Captain continued. “Sometimes he'll make a certain expression, or he'll say something a certain way, and it's like Howard is still here. But then it's...” He shook his head. “Never mind.”

“Were you and Howard close?” Natasha gave Steve a quizzical look. She was clearly picking up on something that Bruce was missing here. It seemed like an obvious statement; Howard Stark had made his shield, so they must have known each other fairly well. But the way she asked it had a sharp edge of curiosity to it.

The way Steve refused to answer was even more puzzling. His jaw was set in a tight line as he looked off into the middle distance. “It doesn't matter, does it? He's long dead. Like mostly everyone else.”

Natasha shot Bruce a meaningful look, which confused him further. He tried to mouth a ‘what?’ behind Steve's back, but she was already striding ahead, checking in with Rhodes about the itinerary.

He was still staring after her as she walked away, so it was something of a fright when a dull thud rang out through the corridor and he looked ahead to see Tony drop to his knees at the far end of a junction, pulling at his helmet as though the oxygen had suddenly been sucked out of the room.
Bruce broke into a run.

Chapter End Notes

The gang's all here for Chapter 8 and our space odyssey road trip gets off to a wonderfully sane start.

This was eventually recovered by SHIELD from the Chitauri mainframe. A taste of what's in store, perhaps?

![Image of Resident Creature Classification System R.C.C.S](image)

Thank you as always for all your support and lovely comments. We love having you all with us for our space adventure. <3
When Tony dropped, Bruce’s first thought was of a gas leak or some kind of oxygen vacuum and he reflexively held his breath as he approached a downed, twitchy Iron Man.

Rhodes was already there, helping Tony to an upright sitting position, propping him against the nearby wall. He was clawing at his armor, pleading with Jarvis to get him out, that he needed air. Some kind of emergency release triggered and the suit opened at the front, revealing a wild, frantic visage. Tony was wheezing, clutching his chest with his one remaining hand, the arc reactor glowing blue between his shaking fingers.

From the suit’s helmet, Bruce could hear Jarvis in calm, soothing tones, slightly tinny but still audible. Heart rate elevated but no imminent physiological crisis.

“He probably gets quite a lot of these,” Bruce murmured, although Tony didn't much seem to care that they were talking about him. He raised his voice. “Deep slow breaths, Tony. It's going to be fine.”

“Another panic attack?” Rhodes probed and Bruce nodded, willing to take Jarvis’ word for it. This wasn’t the AI’s first residency year.

“Hey. It's ok. Take it easy,” Rhodes began, but Tony cut him off at the pass with a choked noise. “It's not ok. You don't get it. None of you do.” He waved the stump of his left arm, which just added to his agitation. The spare shirt they’d given him was already soaked with blood and sweat from his constant picking.

“My fingers,” Tony panted. A vein bulged on his forehead. He was choking on his own words. “Christ, I can’t feel them. They’ve gone numb. I’m gonna-”

“Tony.” Rhodes had both hands on his shoulders, squeezing gently but resolved. War Machine’s steel grip elicited a moan, an overstrung pain response. Tony was still orbiting.

“Whatever we're up against, we have plenty of weapons,” Rhodes continued calmly. “We have two Stark-designed suits of armor, superman, one of Charlie’s Angels and whatever the hell Banner turns into.”

“Plus Jarvis,” Bruce added lamely. “You've still got him too.”


Tony blinked at them, stuck in some kind of processing loop. “Can I hold you to that?” There was a
painful vulnerability in his voice.

“Scouts honor,” Rhodes assured him and Bruce smiled wryly because of course James Rhodes was a fucking Boy Scout.

“Tony, you're getting off this ship,” Rhodes continued. “I promise.” He said it with the kind of genuine confidence of a man with total faith that everything would work out fine. And Bruce supposed that, given that finding Tony had been a kind of miracle in and of itself, maybe Rhodes was somewhat justified in that kind of belief, even if he couldn't quite share it himself.

James Rhodes was a pretty good guy, all things considered.

Bruce looked down as Tony let his suit slip back on, enveloping him until all that was visible was his face. He could hear Jarvis’ muffled voice from inside the helmet, and Tony went on to go through a couple enforced deep breaths, probably guided by his AI. Bruce wondered to himself how often they played this game, if Tony’s long term sedation had a secondary purpose than just to while away the time.

“Better?” Bruce asked after a moment. Tony shot him a slightly paranoid look, as if he didn’t know whether to still be mad about the Pepper business or not.

But it seemed like actual eye contact and a vague nod was about as conciliatory as Bruce was going to get out of him. He'd take it, he decided. No point in getting upset when clearly Tony didn't exactly have social niceties on his mind at the moment. He was alive, and they could work around everything else once they got him off the ship.

With Rhodes’ help he clambered back to his feet and took a few steps which Bruce suspected might have been shakier without Iron Man supporting him. He watched the two friends for a moment as Rhodes cracked some joke under his breath and was rewarded with a wobbly but genuine laugh from Tony. Even after four years apart, there was an obvious, easy camaraderie there. Tony might have changed, sometimes beyond recognition, but clearly his friendship with Rhodes was built to last, and there was an unquestioned trust obvious on Tony's part. Bruce hung back and watched them, the way the two suits side by side looked like two pieces of a set that had been finally reunited.

It was nice, a faint hint of something hopeful inside the grim walls of the death trap they were all stuck on. And it also made him sad, for a myriad of reasons that he couldn't completely place and which were all probably entirely selfish.

“What was that about?” Steve was at Bruce's elbow, a puzzled expression. “Anyone want to clue me in on what's going on? Do I need to be worried here?”

Bruce did not have the patience for Cap's leader-of-the-gang act, nor did he particularly want to play into him policing Tony's mental state every few minutes. “We're stuck miles from Earth on a malfunctioning enemy spaceship full of, at the very least, mutant arachnids, so I'm going to go out on a limb and say… uh… probably?”

Steve stalked on ahead, ostensibly to confer with Rhodes, but Bruce suspected that, in reality, he just wanted to get a look at whether Tony was up to scratch in his sanity standards.

Which meant that they had about a half second of warning in the form of a dying off-key bleep before a steel shutter began to drop from the ceiling. Bruce watched helplessly as it hurtled for Rhodes' head, with War Machine being spared from being guillotined only by Steve's superhuman reflexes, shoving him clear with a force that sent him sprawling back into the opposite corner and denting the wall behind him. Which left Bruce, Natasha and Rhodes trapped on one side of the
shutter, with Tony and Steve on the other.

“Cap… Tony?” Natasha was already pounding uselessly on the reinforced metal. “Can you guys hear me?”

Bruce could hear the sound of a hissed “stop that…!” (Tony doing something to antagonize Steve no doubt), then him knocking experimentally on the door.

Rhodes was trying communication over the HUD, presumably, from his muffled “You alright over there?”

“Natasha stick her finger up a wall socket again?” That was Tony, having gone from mental breakdown to wisecracking within minutes.

“I can hear that!” Nat exclaimed indignantly, rolling her eyes at both Bruce and War Machine.

Bruce sat himself cross legged on the floor by the unmoving steel barrier. Since there wasn't any immediate call to action, he decided that a short rest couldn't go amiss. After all, he'd just spent the past few hours trying to keep pace with a bunch of superheroes. To his surprise, Nat plopped herself down beside him. Even War Machine took on a vaguely loitering stance.

“Look, it doesn't matter. We need to get back to the rest of the team,” Cap's tone came floating through from the other side of the barrier, slightly softened. “Tony, can you fix this? Or find us a way around?”

“Rerouting’s not an option,” Tony was saying to Steve. “Haven’t used the detour in a while. Too risky.”

“Can’t we just blast our way through?” Rhodes asked from their side, giddy at the prospect of being allowed to use War Machine as more than wearable GPS.

“No muscling through the lockdown,” Tony reminded him and there was a faint mechanical whirring noise, of joints and locks disengaging, possibly the sound of him stepping out of his suit. “There. That’s where I need to go. Can you give me a lift?”

“Uh, sure thing. Shouldn't be a problem. You look like you've lost a few pounds since we last saw each other.” Cap's voice came through with a forced chuckle. “Two options. I can give you a boost or you can sit on my shoulder.”

“I am not going to sit on your shoulder after you just told me you think I was chubby back in Manhattan.” Even through a metal barrier, the mock-indignation was obvious. There was the sound of him rummaging about for something.

“Come on, big boy, on your knees,” Tony’s voice was dripping with snark. “And don’t tell me you’re not the bottom type.”

Bruce rolled his eyes and glanced from a facepalming War Machine to Natasha who was quirking an eyebrow and visibly biting the inside of her cheek to keep from laughing. He met her eye and something in his expression sent Natasha over the edge into an undignified snort, as Rhodes shushed them both. It was good to hear a hint of the old Tony again. Bruce could only imagine what shade of purple Captain America was turning at that particular moment.
“Actually, I think I’d rather just watch you try to climb it,” Steve grumbled back. “Any more smart remarks and I might accidentally drop you.”

To the occupants of shutter side A it was a bit of a guessing game to piece together what happened next. Tony’s voice-over certainly did not help.

“… whoa, easy there, I’m still stiff as a board after my beauty sleep… closer to that wall there… well, work for it…”

There was a clatter, followed by some rather colorful expletives.

“Are you going to keep staring, or will you pick it up already?” Tony was asking impatiently.

There was a moment of silence before Steve huffed. “I’m not touching that.”

“Don’t make me have to grab it myself,” Tony said. “Or I’ll shove it in your face when I’m done.”

Natasha had stopped pretending to even attempt to hold her laughter in by this point and War Machine had given up on trying to quiet them. Bruce, for his part, was snickering into his hand, his shoulders shaking slightly.

“I wish I was recording this,” Nat whispered and Rhodes rolled his eyes. “I bet there's a whole section of the internet that would pay good money for it.”

“Will you stay still and stop waving that thing around...?!” Steve's voice came from the other side of the door.

There was a clatter, a groan, a loud thud and some very un-Cap-like curse words from behind the shutter. A mechanism began to creak to life, the corrugated metal rising slowly to reveal Steve and Tony in an undignified heap on the ground.

“We're not interrupting anything, are we boys?” Natasha smirked at them.

Tony was quirking an eyebrow from where he was sprawled haphazardly across Steve, giving Natasha a come-hither look that would have had fangirls all over the world melt on the spot, even through his haze of grime and facial hair.

“Why, you wanna join? We could share him.” He was feigning a sloppy smooch at Steve, who proceeded to unceremoniously fling off Tony and find his feet a safe distance away, visibly disgruntled.

Rhodes held out an armored hand to help Tony up from his ditch. “I don’t think you stand a chance of getting laid before you have a shower, man. Brotherly advice.”

“He’s right, you smell like a sewer, Stark.” Steve glared at Tony as he clambered to his feet. Then he caught himself, flustered. “Not that you’d be… I mean not that…”

“Next chance we get I'm dousing you in hand sanitizer and trimming that mess on your face,” Natasha promised, changing the subject and sparing Steve's blushes in the process.

“You brought hand sanitizer with you into space?” Bruce looked at her incredulously.
“No, but you did, in your first aid kit. And I swiped it when you weren't paying attention.” Nat stuck her tongue out at him and it was such an incongruous gesture that he couldn't help but laugh.

“Guys,” Steve cleared his throat, but some of his earlier tension seemed to have been dissipated. And Bruce wondered to himself if just maybe, this newfound sense of camaraderie was a good sign of things to come. If they could actually be a team again, the cohesive unit that they'd almost, but not quite achieved in New York. Maybe finding Tony was exactly what they'd needed to patch everything back together.

His thoughts were cut off as what appeared to be a full scale version of the fun-sized monster that Natasha had taken out earlier launched itself out of nowhere onto Iron Man's shoulders, pinning him to the floor with surprising facility, as if it had just tipped over a card house rather than a four-hundred pound suit of armor. Rhodes loosed a bright repulsor bolt from the palm of his hand, which seemed to shock it back a little, but really mostly just provoked an irritated screech from the creature, which Bruce was none to pleased to notice had fangs the length of his forearm.

“Well.” Bruce pointed at the monstrosity, blinking. “That's… quite large.”

There was a blur of red, white and blue as Cap shoved him aside and launched himself at the creature, his leg aimed high in a flying kick. He ricocheted off the thing and into the nearest wall, as Natasha pulled out her gun and sunk a few bullets into its carapace. It shrieked again and flailed backwards, staggering enough to give Tony a chance of sliding out from under it.

Bruce hung back on the edges of the fight, watching the chaos unfold, picking at the slightly fraying sleeves of his jumper. He took a slow deep breath in through his nose and out through his mouth. Even though objectively he knew that nothing could really physically harm him, his body still wanted to react as though there was an imminent danger, an automated evolutionary response ingrained from when he used to be a little more breakable. He could feel that slight tell-tale elevation of his pulse that was a warning sign to get things under control. The Other Guy inside him was pushing insistently at the walls of his mind, not clamoring yet, but raising his head curiously, wondering if it was time to fight. He murmured something soothing to the shared occupant of his head, throwing the message out there that everything was fine, that he could carry on dozing, that there was nothing to worry about. And with deep, controlled breaths, he got a handle on the short spike in his heart rate, lulling the Hulk back to sleep.

Meanwhile the battle roared on around him. Tony had extricated himself from under the alien, but the combined efforts of vibranium, 9mm and repulsor tech did little to impress their many-legged opponent, which had apparently set a personal goal in avenging its very dead offspring.

Tony was yelling above the mayhem, animatedly reminding them how they didn’t want to get too close to the thing’s double-rowed display of ivories. That was just before four sets of eyes honed in on the stars and stripes of Captain America's uniform.

In an instant, Steve was pinned to the wall, barely having time to register the warning of poison before a dripping fang was inches from his throat. Beads of sweat formed on his forehead as he heaved all his upper body strength against his attacker, his enhanced musculature groaning nonetheless at the effort. But the spider was strong, maybe just hardy enough to take him for a spin.

Natasha was emptying another clip into its back, while Rhodes pounded it with a volley of mini-missiles. The only one keeping on the back burner was Iron Man, and Bruce frowned as a sidetrack thought hit him: They’d come well stocked with supplies, ammo, spare power packs... but if this was just one creature gobbling up their provisions like candy then they’d clearly been overly optimistic about what they'd need. Suddenly, Tony’s earlier outburst seemed a lot more legitimate.
Cap, in the interim, had managed to push the thing off for a split second, long enough to shift but not long enough to wriggle free. When the spider’s weight came crashing down on him again, that long, sharp appendage found a home in his upper arm, a surface scratch deep enough to tear through his suit and graze his bicep. Bruce winced as he watched.

Natasha got a lucky shot in and the thing howled as a bullet lodged itself in one of its joints. It dropped its prey and turned around with a gesture that Bruce might have almost described as purposeful.

As it began to amble towards Widow, Bruce dashed forward and looped one of Steve's arms around his shoulder, supporting him upright as he slumped to the wall, looking for all the world as though he was going to throw up all down his star-spangled suit.

“Think we need a diversion here!” War Machine put forward as the creature closed in on Natasha, who was firing off rounds like a rogue Catherine wheel. To little effect. Clearly nobody was killing the thing any time soon.

Bruce collapsed under Steve's weight and the two of them ended up in a heap on the floor, with the other man mumbling something incoherently. He was foaming a little around the mouth and his skin was giving Tony's a run for its money in terms of unhealthy pallor. Through the torn fabric of Cap's suit, he could see an angry puncture wound, flecks of gray radiating out from the indent as the poison crept down his blood vessels and through his system. Bruce gave it an experimental squeeze and some yellow-tinged liquid came flowing out of the wound, but it seemed like the venom was already taking hold as Steve flashed the whites of his unfocused, rolling eyes, his pupils the size of nickels.

“Rhodey, on me!” Iron Man was yelling and Bruce looked up from his semi-conscious patient when Tony began to blast the refrain of Ballroom Blitz at his stereo’s max capacity. The spider let go of Natasha, clearly more offended by the 70’s chart stormer than SHIELD super spies.

Bruce sighed with relief as he watched Iron Man and War Machine coralling the arachnid, Tony firing up his thrusters and gunning for a far-off storage room, while Rhodes encouraged the beast by aiming strategic repulsor shots at its back.

With the situation somewhat under control Bruce pulled a first aid kit out of his holdall and redirected his attention back to the wound on Steve's arm. Which, given how fast the venom seemed to be acting, honestly was a little bit like closing the barn door after the horse had bolted.

“S… son of a gun...” Cap was mumbling, blinking furiously and clearly struggling to stay focused. But whatever had a hold on him, he was fighting hard. His eyes had stopped rolling about in their sockets and the grey lines were shrinking back from around the wound.

“Tony!”

Bruce’s head shot up at War Machine’s cry, and he located Rhodes and Natasha banging against a locked door, with Iron Man and the spawn from outer space out of view.

“Stark, can you hear us?” Natasha was trying to override the door’s mechanisms.

Rhodes abruptly stopped his assault on the door and motioned for Widow to stand back, most likely at Tony's behest. He stood anxiously with Natasha, hoping not to hear the sound of whatever it sounded like when a metal coated human fell prey to a giant spider monster.

A clamor of grating metal came from the other room, then from above them, before eventually tapering off in the distance.
Eventually Rhodes exhaled a breath and patched his comm-link through the speakers. Tony's voice came in loud and clear. “Get away from that door. Cap still kicking?”

Bruce hesitated, watching the color slowly returning to the man’s face. “He does seem to be...”

“I'm fine,” cut in Steve, his voice terse. “I'm-

The supersoldier leaned over and vomited abruptly onto the ground, narrowly missing Bruce’s holdall. Typical. It was really shaping up to be one of those days, he reflected.

At least it seemed to do the trick, because a moment later, Steve was sitting far more upright than he had been and was wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“Help me up,” he said bluntly and Bruce obliged, giving him an arm to lean on as he propped himself up against the wall. He seemed a little shaky on his feet, but he was still standing. “What's the word on Stark?”

“Uh, he'll meet us later, I think?” Bruce glanced over to where War Machine was obviously keeping Tony updated over comms.

“Yeah, Cap's all good,” Rhodes muttered. “Send me a rendezvous point on the schematics and we'll swing by and pick you up.” ‘All good’ seemed to be a remarkably euphemistic way of putting it, given that Steve looked greener than Bruce on a bad day.

“Keep a close eye on him,” Tony's voice crackled through, Rhodes having the decency to put him on whatever the War Machine equivalent of speakerphone was. “Nobody else is injured?”

It was nice that he cared, Bruce decided. That was a positive sign.

They traipsed as a slightly battered group through the dim corridors, lead by the light from War Machine's suit. Bruce offered Cap an arm to lean on, but he shrugged him off irritably, despite the fact that he looked like he might lose some more of his lunch.

Nobody was talking, the mood having gone from bad to worse after the spider attack. Natasha had her gun out, peering round every corner as though she were ready to start unloading bullets at any moment.

Captain America, meanwhile, began feeling distinctly odd. He was aware, objectively, that he was on a ship, in the middle of space, with a woman, what looked like a robot-man and someone else, someone who he knew was dangerous but couldn't quite place why. But that was ridiculous, of course. Why would he be in space? His head felt fuzzy. Weren't they at war? The last thing he remembered, he was with the British and US troops, making camp near France, getting ready to stick one to the Boche. What had happened in the meantime?

Maybe it wasn't a spaceship. No, spaceship was ridiculous. Spaceships weren't real. Spaceships were something Howard Stark came up with on one of his mind trips. This was a submarine. That had to be it.

But how had they come to be trapped on a Nazi submarine? Was he a prisoner? He looked at the woman and remembered that she was Russian - a spy. But weren't the Russians supposed to be on their side? Sort of? None of this made sense. Was the armored man their guard?

He turned to the bespectacled man beside him and decided that, if he was a prisoner - and how else would he have ended up on a German submarine? - then he was the only one. Steve vaguely remembered that the man was a scientist. And that he didn't trust him.
Of course.

The Russian spy was a double agent, she must have betrayed Steve and he'd been captured. Probably drugged, which was why his head felt so muggy, why he could taste puke in his mouth. The armored man was his guard and this guy must be the Nazi scientist who was planning to experiment on him, to dissect him until he found out the secret behind the serum.

Well, they'd underestimated him. Thinking that they could drug him and he'd just walk meekly to his doom. He was Captain America. He didn't surrender. The fate of the allied powers was at stake. They had a war to win, for crying out loud!

“Think I'll come quietly?!” he suddenly roared and clearly he had the element of surprise because the Nazi scientist looked fairly taken aback. The rest of them, the guard and the spy, turned around and he raised his shield. They'd made a big mistake by not taking his shield. He grabbed the scientist by the throat and pinned him to the wall.

“Nobody move!” he yelled. “I want the codes to the goddamn control room or I'll splatter his head all over the wall! I'm getting off this damn submarine!”

Meanwhile, to everyone else who wasn't Captain America, the following events took place. Steve went from stumbling along looking rather unwell, to screaming about submarines and trying to choke Bruce to death, who was fighting for air, his eyes wide in surprise and his hands fluttering uselessly at his neck as he tried to extricate himself from the situation without waking up the Other Guy. His eyes began to take on a distinctly green flash to them as he fought to keep control.

“Cap, Steve.” Natasha kept her gun raised. “What are you doing...?”

“YOU WON'T TAKE ME ALIVE!” Steve was screaming at the top of his lungs.

“Hey Tony,” Rhodes muttered into the comm-link. “Scratch that on Cap. He's cuckoo for coco puffs. If you're nearby, we could really use a hand right about now.”

Chapter End Notes

Well...this is all going swimmingly. On a side note, we had a lot of fun writing this chapter.

Tune in next week to see if Cap makes it back to the 21st century or if he's doomed to keep tripping balls and partying like it's 1943. In the meantime, please enjoy a peek at things from his point of view.
As ever, thank you so so much for reading and for letting us know what you think.

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Chapter 10

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Tony’s analysis of space spider venom had so far confined itself to a modest study population of one, namely himself on three unrelated incidents which had all been altogether disagreeable.

It was somewhat reassuring that test subject number two showed similar effects to his early observations, although from what Tony could gather from the warbled bits and pieces coming in through comms Captain America wasn’t tripping through the R rated version of Alice’s Wonderland while being chased by man-sized undead caterpillars, but had tottered straight back into the trenches of World War II.

“Dude, don’t stop for donuts on the way over.” Rhodey’s voice sounded strained, and it was cut off by a series of grunts and raps, before Steve’s growl rang through loud and clear: “Let go of me you no good Nazi piece of garbage!”

Tony disabled cruise-control. It was time to burn the soot off the particle filters.

Three intersections later Iron Man barreled head on into Captain America complete with hostage, as though he were a bowling ball with a personal vendetta against a particular set of pins. The three of them went tumbling, Bruce somewhere to the periphery, while Steve responded by bringing his knees up and beginning to smother Tony with a barrage of kicks and punches that felt like being worked on by a sledgehammer.

“Hey. Hey, snap out of it!” Tony yelled through the speakers, eliciting a second’s worth of hesitation on Cap’s end.

War Machine took advantage of this momentary confusion to weigh in by diving onto both of them and pinning down Steve's legs. He let his faceplate slide back, maybe hoping that Cap would put two and two together and realize that there weren't many African Americans fighting for Hitler.

Meanwhile Bruce was lying on his side in a crumpled heap against the wall, coughing and gasping for breath, his body partly obscured by Natasha’s petite frame. In the event of a spontaneous Code Green an estimated hundred-thirty pounds of femme fatale weren’t going to conceal the problem at hand, Tony decided.

“Who are you people?!” Cap shouted, bewildered, and it wasn't clear if he was going for the talk-it-out approach or was just extremely well restrained between Iron Man and War Machine. “What's happening to me? Why am... where am...?”

Tony debated for a second coming out with the truth, but a statement along the lines of ‘you’re orbiting Earth on a ghost alien spaceship’ probably wasn’t going to put it over. Besides, if Steve continued to follow in Tony’s footsteps as far as symptoms went, this was going to get a lot uglier before it got any prettier.

And indeed, Cap began fighting like a German shepherd on amphetamine, kicking and screaming until he almost bucked off Iron Man.

Tony pulled up the HUD-to-HUD with War Machine. “Want to send him off to sleep?”

“Absolutely,” Rhodey replied through gritted teeth, dodging one of Cap's flailing legs. With Tony
Having his arms pinned, Rhodey snaked around and looped an elbow round Steve's neck, squeezing hard enough to cut off circulation. Even with the enhanced strength from his suit it seemed to take an eternity for the supersoldier to go down. In the process he managed to loosen an elbow, catching Rhodey straight in the nose.

Eventually his face began to turn a tomato shade of red, his kicks became less powerful and his shoulders went limp.

“Dude.” Rhodey’s voice was slightly stuffy through the blood dripping from his nose. “I just choked out Captain America. Awesome.”

“I'm sure that'll make a great dinner party anecdote,” Natasha remarked dryly over her shoulder. “But for now, we've got a huge problem on our hands if he wakes up and still thinks he's in the Third fucking Reich.”

There was no way to tell if Steve would come to as the 1940’s version of himself. Tony wasn’t elated about the prospect of a replay. Between the two of them War Machine and Iron Man had barely managed to keep him down. If they got another Nazi flashback in the middle of an untimely situation, say fending off space villains, Tony really didn’t want to have to roleplay a pissed SS officer.

“We need to get out of here,” Natasha pressed, looking down at Cap’s limp form. “If that’s what the mommy did, I really don’t want to meet the patriarch of this picture perfect family.”

“No, you don’t,” Tony agreed tensely.

“May I suggest a nearby safe room, sir?” Jarvis proposed, displaying an alternative route in a blue dotted line. “A-6 is a ten minute walk away. My most recent records indicate supplies in following fields: nutrition, medical, ammunition.”

“You set up safe rooms?” Bruce sounded impressed. “That must have taken a lot of work.”

That was the elegant way of putting it. It had taken sweat, blood and tears to outfit these dens and, like everything in Chitauri land, it hadn’t come cheap.

Rhodey groaned from underneath Steve's dead weight. “You sure know how to spoil your guests, Tones.” He added in a muffled voice, “Anyone else want to give me a hand with this?”

“You seem to be doing a great job there,” Natasha said smugly. “Besides, you're the one who single handedly KO-ed him. Wouldn't want you to think we were taking the credit, Colonel. Besides.” She waved Cap's shield around. “I'm helping carry something too.”

“He's a person, not a hunting trophy,” Bruce reminded them with mild disapproval, but he still couldn't keep from smiling a little. Tony thought of the empty space above the fireplace in Malibu. Walnut mount, bronze tag and America’s undefeatable blockhead as keepsake. He would drive the nail into the wall himself if that was what it took.

With that particular fancy to keep him busy Tony barely picked up on the fact that ten minutes had turned out to be slightly on the optimistic side for their destination. But at least they managed to proceed unmolested by any of the other occupants of the ship.

Standing aside to let him deal with the locking mechanism, the group eventually traipsed inside what was essentially a re-enforced supply room. A few boxes of ammo and a basic first aid kit sat on the shelves and there was some dubious looking refiltered liquid and the familiar sludge which covered the nutrition part. A thick layer of dust had settled over everything in his absence. When was it that
he’d been here the last time?

Tony hung back as the others entered, stepping out of Iron Man like it was a pair of shoes left at the front door. The suit, positioned strategically to block the only entry and exit point, was promptly hooked up to a breaker box which Tony had converted into the Chitauri equivalent of a charging capacitor.

“J, sentry. We ok on the power supply?”

Iron Man’s optic LED’s lit up and two repulsor outfitted metal palms raised to point to either side of the corridor. If Sigourney Weaver had had Stark smart-tech instead of that crappy Weyland retro-munitions, Aliens 2 would have been the last movie of that franchise. Tony’d learned a thing or two about fending off the real life version of Hollywood deep space horror over the years.

Pro advice: Steer clear of portals to demonic realms and don't investigate the weird noise coming from the creepy darkened basement. Like, ever. Seriously.

“Motion tracker on,” Tony commanded, unclasping a glass fiber plate to reach into the storage unit beneath. “Protocol 52-H. I’m taking the beacon.”

With Iron Man on lookout he pushed the door shut, engaging the various bolts and locks that were installed on the frame.

“Cosy,” Natasha said, leaning against a nearby bench.

Cap, meanwhile, had been propped up against the wall, looking for all the world like a ragdoll version of himself. Tony frowned. “Can we just leave him like that?”

“Probably not.” Natasha fished around in one of her pockets and languidly produced a pair of handcuffs with a slightly suggestive smirk. Of course. Mistress Romanoff carried cuffs ’n collar. Tony rolled his eyes. Typical.

She continued. “These won't hold him for long, but they'll buy us enough time if he wakes up and still thinks it's springtime for Hitler.”

She tossed them to Rhodey, who fastened Cap to the nearest solid looking structure, a thick metal column which was hopefully either really strong or really unimportant to the structural integrity of the ship.

“The fetish look suits him,” Tony said with a smirk although he doubted bedroom cop locks were going to keep Captain America from thwarting the Third Reich’s expansion into space if he really set his mind to it.

Scratching at his beard he gave the rest of the team a slightly self-conscious look. “Not to dash your hopes, but last time I got kissed by the spider prince it took around a week for the head trip to stop. We might have to, uh, come up with a Plan B.”

“We don't have a week,” Natasha pointed out. Buzz! Wrong answer! That they had all the time in the world. That was how things worked around here. An eternity to waste away. Infinity minus thirty seconds.

“You're human,” Bruce said hopefully. He was kneeling by Steve's unconscious form, shining a pen torch into his eyes, taking his pulse. A showcase medic, really. “The super serum effect should clear the venom from his system much faster. Based on his accelerated metabolism and healing properties, if it took you a week to recover it should take Steve… hours, at most. All being well.”
“You sure about that?” Rhodey sounded as dubious as Tony felt. If anything, Bruce had probably jinxed it with that statement and they were looking at hakenkreuz graffiti for the reminder of the journey.

“Fairly. I did spend quite a lot of time studying this particular field.” Bruce made a rueful expression. “It didn’t work out so well for me. But I did learn a thing or two.”

“Well then, we need to sit tight until sleeping beauty comes around,” Natasha declared, perching on the edge of Tony's makeshift cot. “And I guess we just hope that when he does, he’s in the right century.”

The wait-and-see approach, never one of Tony’s favorites, turned out to be easier said than done. Rhodey had stepped out of his suit and was doing field maintenance on War Machine the second time over, as though he was daring some renegade screw to accidentally loosen in the ten minutes it had taken him to give the entire set-up a once-over. Bruce was busy picking up everything that wasn’t properly bolted into place. As much as Tony valued the excited show of interest, this new influx of company had caused him to develop the slightly unsocial attitude of bearing a grudge against people who borrowed his toys without his consent, ending in a slew of ‘don’t touch that’ and ‘can you put those back?’ which eventually dulled even the most ecstatic discoverer’s spirit.

So twenty minutes into Tony’s predicted seven days of Christmas they had passed through every nuance of awkwardness and Steve still gave no sign whether the Allied were making any progress or not. By the half hour mark Tony was as fidgety as a toad on a griddle, pacing the room as if he was trying to trench his way out.

Waking cycles weren’t designed for off-the-cuff rest stops. When he was awake he was wide-awake, on the ball, fastest on the draw. Consciousness was an insomniac’s Vegas trip, full of zest for action and drive. Once he fell asleep it was game over. Between him and Jarvis they’d doctored up a usable, but far from perfect version of the Good Morning smoothie. It would keep Tony on his feet for days, and it was pretty much the only thing that kept Tony on his feet at all. He couldn’t simply waste it on pilates and autosuggestive yogatation.

“Can’t I just go?” he blurted out, at the sharp end of his patience. “It’s not too far. I could start with the repairs and you guys catch up once Steve’s awake.”

“No!” Bruce and Rhodey declared in emphatic unison.

“Absolutely not.” Rhodey was crossing his arms over his chest. “It's not worth the risk. Both to you, and to us, if something happens with the map or we get lost. It's too dangerous.”

“If you're bored, we could, I don’t know… play I-spy?” Bruce offered earnestly, a proposition which thankfully no one picked up on. Tony resumed pacing like a dog on a chain.

“Sit down, Stark,” Natasha ordered sternly and Tony wondered whether she’d produce another set of handcuffs and tie him up next to Steve. He spooked when she suddenly brought out a knife from somewhere about her person, seemingly producing it from thin air.

“Don't look so alarmed,” cued the master assassin. She calmly pulled some hand sanitizer and tissues from her pack, while Tony was already calculating his best escape route.

He gestured to the pocketknife in Natasha’s hand like it was a twenty inch machete. “I spy with my little eye… a butcher blade. You don’t seriously expect me to let you near my throat with that thing, do you? No. Categorically no. Over my dead body no. I’ll text up my stylist first thing back home, promise.”
“Dude, we’re trapped in a room the size of a postage stamp,” said Rhodey, that traitor. “In the name of the group’s olfactory survival, you’re going through decon. Now.”

Tony had his hands up. “Not to offend anyone, but my jugular has certain trust issues with Russian steel. If this is about wasting valuable resources, I’d rather drink the water than shower in it.” He shot a desperate glance at Bruce. “And shouldn’t we keep the travelsize Purell for emergency nicks?”

“It’s fine, I have a spare.” Bruce clearly wasn’t going to be his backup on this one. “Besides, we’re all kind of suffering here.” He scrunched up his nose.

Natasha was sporting a Cheshire cat smile as she advanced on him with the knife. Horror scenario survival tip #2: don’t let yourself get cornered. Tony felt the bench press against the backside of his legs. He was a cat in a mousetrap.

“If you close your eyes and relax, you might actually enjoy this,” Natasha insisted. Did a hog enjoy being gutted?

“You'll feel better after a freshen up,” Rhodey wheedled.

“Please,” Bruce added. “For all our sakes.”

“I am not ok with this,” Tony clarified, backing up against the wall. “Not at all. I feel violated.”

The first act of domestic abuse included a face scrub with half the hand sanitizer at the expense of three complacent hankies, which, once he was done with them, matched the earthly color of Chitauri slosh. Apart from the fact that he was now sporting a whiff of disinfectant on top of his space-hobo cologne Tony failed to experience any of the promised feeling of refreshment. No, he was rather breaking out in cold sweat at the sight of Natasha whetting her cleaver.

“Don’t make me have to hold you down,” Rhodey threatened jokingly. Easy for him to say, standing on the right side of the blade.

“Only you could complain about getting a close shave from a beautiful woman,” Natasha laughed sadistically. She ran the cold metal over his face with a practiced ease, pulling the skin taught as she worked. Tony was just waiting for the stab and pull; a Colombian necktie seemed inescapable at this point.

“You'll have to wait until you're back to Earth before you get your Van Dyke,” Natasha murmured, scraping the sharp edge along his chin.

“First step towards rejoining polite society,” Rhodey joked. “Not that you and polite society ever particularly got along.”

“Almost done.” Natasha gave him a reassuring smile. She had better look at what she was doing instead of trying to pacify him. Tony was terrified enough to refrain from swallowing, lest his Adam’s apple bob into the wrong direction, say, towards the death trap of her meat axe.

“I'm going to tidy up this rat's nest too,” Natasha said with all the calm in the world as she withdrew the blade and gave his matted hair a ruffle. “Bruce, you got some scissors in your first aid kit?” Tony was surprised that she hadn’t already stolen them.

Bruce rummaged around in his bag and handed them over with a half-hearted grumble. She gave him a broad smile which seemed to cause the tips of the doctor's ears to turn red. Not the time for gooey romances, people. It was Protect Tony’s Carotid day.
By the time Natasha had gone from putting the whammy on their resident virgin and focused back on her job as hairdresser Tony had maybe gone from having swallowed a broomstick to slightly unwinding and trying not to actively resist a complimentary scalp massage.

When she was done the jury of three lined up in front of him to pass their expert opinions on Project Makeover.

Natasha looked satisfied enough after she did a last minute snip behind his left ear and Bruce was apparently infatuated enough to refrain from saying anything in case Widow had botched it up. Only Rhodey seemed contemplative, like something didn’t quite add up for him but he couldn’t exactly decide on the root cause.

“What?” Tony asked, brushing a hand over his cheek. If anything, he felt exposed now, naked.

“It’s just weird, seeing you with a totally clean shave,” Rhodey said slowly. “But you look better.”

“It’s a good thing,” Bruce added uncertainly. “You’re more… recognizable.” They both continued to stare as though they were seeing him for the first time.

“Guys, seriously. I know I’m good but you don’t need to get all misty eyed over it,” Natasha attempted to lighten the mood. She smoothed a strand of hair down at the nape of his neck. “It’s a bit less playboy than your usual look but I always thought you’d do better without that stupid goatee. And at least your space-lice are mostly homeless now.” She sounded like she was only half joking as she kicked at the small pile of hair on the floor.

“It’s not stupid,” Tony countered, touching his chin to where the familiar beard was now missing. “It’s trademark. Do we have a mirror? On a scale of one to ten, how bad is it?”

“No mirror, but I’d go for a solid eight,” Rhodey ventured. “Wrong side of forty, divorced, behind on alimony payments, your best friend’s your dog.” He gave Tony a conciliatory clap on the shoulder. “If you want back on the cover of GQ you’re looking at Whey shakes and sit-ups, man. Lots of them.”

“I thought I was looking at Mama Rhodes’ calorie splurges?” Tony said.

“I’ll spoon-feed you baby puree while you’re planking,” Rhodey offered with a snicker.

Tony made a face. “That’s legitimately disgusting. I’m a grown man, I don’t do baby food. At the very least puree a steak.”

As it turned out there was a small mirror stuck to the inside of one of Bruce's med boxes and, after much searching, he produced it triumphantly. “Here.”

“At least you won’t scare any kids when you make your grand entrance back into Earth’s atmosphere,” Natasha preempted defensively.

“I think you did a great job,” Bruce hastened to add, ever eager to stay in the redhead's good graces. “And I’m sure if Tony hadn't had four years to forget his manners, he'd have said thank you by now.”

“It's fine, I do it for the art, not the accolades.” Natasha gestured to Tony as though he was her latest masterpiece. “Besides, I can handle it,” she mock-pouted. “I'm Russian. Stoicism's in my blood.”

Tony gave his mirror-self a thorough examination before reaching the conclusion that a clean shave had worked wonders in his early twenties, but wasn’t doing him any favors now. Middle aged could-
have-been was a remarkably accurate description, if the could-have-been related to a prosperous ascent as Chitauri lab rat.

“IT'S not too shabby,” he acknowledged eventually, handing back the mirror. “With a bit of luck it's going to be smooth sailing from here on out, if I can blind the creepers with my dashing new looks.” He tugged out his chin and gave them a flashy grin, the kind the paparazzi loved best.

Then he pointed at an unconscious Steve in the corner. “He could barely resist me when I rocked the cavemen flair. How do you suggest we keep him out of my pants now that I'm back to my irresistible self?”

Rhodey arched an eyebrow. “I'd rather worry about keeping his fist out of your teeth, to be honest.”

At this, Natasha shot Bruce another knowing look, which was met with obvious bewilderment on the scientist's part. But whatever she was about to say was cut short by a screeching sound immediately outside the door, accompanied by the tell-tale scrape of talons on metal.

“What was-” Bruce opened his mouth but Natasha put a finger to her lips. Rhodey hastened over to his suit, letting War Machine envelop, his repulsor beams glowing softly, silently.

Tony grabbed for the beacon he'd taken from Iron Man earlier, watching the single light blink in rapid succession. Jarvis was supposed to launch counter measures on sight, unless the detected assailant beat a seventy percent success rate of incapacitating it. Which meant they were dealing with something worse than vermin. The wall crawlers maybe? Tony was picking up a string of curses under his breath. Those weren’t supposed to be here.

Christ.

He mouthed a silent ‘no’ to Rhodey and gestured for him to stay put. They didn’t want to fight whatever was out there. If it passed them, they might get out of this alive.

“YOU DEPLORABLE NAZI PIGS!”

So, that would be Captain America awake then, Tony thought ruefully. And judging by what he was yelling, he hadn't quite made it back to the 21st century yet.

Bruce was at Steve's side in an instant, clamping a hand over his mouth. A moment later, he was suppressing a squeal as the captain sunk his teeth into it, but he kept it there doggedly, a desperate attempt to muffle the blonde man's strident protests.

“Please calm down, Steve,” Bruce was whispering in what was less a soothing murmur and more of a desperate mantra. “Please calm down.”

Cap pulled against his cuffs, which cut into the flesh of his wrists as Natasha came to Bruce's help and tried in vain to prevent him from struggling himself into an injury.

Rhodey looked to Tony as the scraping sound outside the door grew nearer.

“FUCK,” Tony hissed, running a hand through his newly cut hair. This was it. He had made it four years to die because Steve Rogers couldn’t shut his damn trap.

“J.” He held the one-way transceiver to his lips. “Play the hare. Lure it. Big loop.”

The whirring of servo motors and repulsor tech resounded from behind the door. A high pitched shriek came from the creature before a considerable sized dent bent the steel door inward. Tony lept
back, nearly tripping over one of Cap’s flailing legs.

The ruckus outside subsided, Jarvis shepherding the thing away from them.

“Rhodey!” Tony was pushing at crates to reveal a shuttered crawlway at the far side of the room. “Open this. And for Christ’s sake, shut him up!”

“Can’t do both at once, Tones,” Rhodey replied in frustration, helping Tony heave boxes out of the way and prying off the shutter. The metal warped as he did so, but to be fair, they weren’t going to be holed up in here for much longer, regardless of what played out.

Tony got on his hand and knees and crawled.

Rhodey watched Tony disappear into the vent and turned to find Banner still trying to shush the captain. The best he’d managed to do was disengage his hand from Rogers’ teeth and honestly, that had just made everything worse because he was now yelling at the top of his lungs.

“Don’t you have any sedatives?!” Romanoff demanded.

“I’ve got morphine, but he’ll metabolize the damn stuff in five seconds flat.” Banner sounded desperate over the cacophony of screaming. “Jesus Christ, Steve, please calm the fuck down! The war’s over!”

“A bit of help here, Colonel?!” Romanoff’s tone was urgent, but there was little that Rhodey could do and he had potentially far bigger issues on his hands right now in the form of the buckling door.

Romanoff turned her head to see the open vent and Tony’s missing person. “Hey, what?” She looked at Rhodey with wide eyes. “Did he just jump bail on us?”

“You sorry Krauts!” Cap was roaring, too busy trying to burst open his handcuffs to listen to their cumulative efforts of pulling him back to the present. Rhodey was surprised to note that Rogers really didn’t have as many qualms about using colorful language as he had previously led them all to believe.

“We're not on a submarine,” Banner kept trying. “We're in space.”

None of this information seemed particularly helpful. Tony was God knew where, the boogieman was snacking on Iron Man and apparently they had to subdue America’s finest before they could even think of leaving the safe room.

“Knock him out,” Romanoff ordered through gritted teeth. She had managed to pin one of Rogers’ arms behind his back, but there was no telling how long she could hold him like that.

Just then there was renewed uproar outside the door.

“Hey! Hey!” Tony’s voice came from the other side, accompanied by incessant knocking. “Open the fucking door!”

Desperately, Banner dove for the door while Rhodey threw the full weight of himself and War Machine across Rogers’ legs, pinning him momentarily. He was already starting to shake them off as the doc activated the release mechanism and Iron Man came staggering through, covered in chips and dents. Still, at least he was alone, thank heavens for small favors.

The faceplate slid back to reveal a heartily pissed off looking Tony.
Banner shut the door hastily as the captain continued to squirm under their hold. Rhodey was well aware that knocking him out was the best option, but unfortunately in order to do that, he'd have to get off him to get a clear swing and that wasn't exactly an option, given that Cap was likely to spring up like a GI Joe jack-in-the-box as soon as he moved.

And then suddenly, something miraculous happened and Rogers went limp.

It was so unexpected that Rhodey turned to look at him in shock. He'd gone from screaming his lungs out to stunned motionlessness as he stared up at Tony, blue eyes wide.

“Howard...?” Cap choked out, a single word dripping with hurt confusion.

There were topics you talked about with Tony and there were those you avoided bringing up. Howard Stark was definitely of the latter category. Touching on daddy issues when Tony was obviously not at his mental peak and, from the looks of it, had just been hounded through a spaceship by E.T’s older brother maybe wasn’t the most clever course of action.

Tony swallowed down a dry throat, clamping armored fingers into a fist as he stared back at Cap, who was waiting for a reaction from the wrong generation of Stark.

But clearly Tony wasn’t in the mood for another roleplay. He advanced on Rogers like a red and gold bulldozer, clamping Iron Man’s gauntlet around the supersoldier’s throat. Sparks flew from deep clefts on the backside of the suit. Whatever hadn’t just eaten them had given the armor a rough time.

“You better clean up your act, Stevie-boy, or I swear I’ll mop up the floor with your face,” Tony growled, a severe contrast to the joking attitude he’d carried before.

Even Romanoff looked uncomfortable.

Tony squeezed just a little bit harder, dropping his voice to a hiss. “Howard’s not here to suck you off, private. Now drop the Nazi shit or I swear I’m going to let Erskine know what a scumbag you really are. You get that?”

Rogers stopped struggling against his handcuffs, a look of shock and confusion on his face. Whether it was the tone, or whether Tony had just hit the right nerve, it seemed to be working. Maybe, deep down, Cap had never really shaken who he was at his core. It was interesting to watch, the way he looked up at Tony, like a kid who’d been caught doing something wrong.

“Tony...” Banner was murmuring a warning, a faint caution to dial it back. The expression on Steve’s face was painfully vulnerable, a crumpled, uncomprehending hurt shimmering in his baby blues. It was nothing like Rhodey had ever seen in the captain’s face before.

“Please, I don’t...” Cap’s voice wavered. “Why are you saying...?” He strained against his cuffs but it seemed less like his frantic struggle from earlier and more like he was trying to reach out. “What did they do to you, Howard? That’s not him! What did you do to him?!” His voice was hoarse from screaming, as he looked to Romanoff of all people for answers. She evaded his stare awkwardly as Banner tried again with reassurances. Rhodey watched the blood drip onto the floor from where he had pulled so hard that his wrists were cut.

“Not you.” He stared back at Tony blinking back tears. The sight was difficult to watch, far too raw and intimate for anything that Rhodey wanted to be a part of. “Not you too, Howard.”

Tony for his part looked like he was fighting an entirely different battle with himself. Growing up with a father who preferred to spend his time reminiscing over Brooklyn’s underdog while he nursed
a Johnny Walker hadn’t exactly made Tony Captain America’s number one fan, a demur that had endured all through adulthood. The fact that Rogers had been, to whatever extent, responsible for Tony’s space exile wasn’t really tipping the scales into the supersoldier’s favor right now.

“Stop saying his name,” Tony growled. “Howard this, Howard that.” He was waving his hand in front of Steve’s face. “Howard, Howard, Howard,” he chanted, but there was an edge of something new to his voice. Something unhinged. The repulsor on his palm was heating up. Iron Man whizzed and creaked from its latest encounter.

“What’d you see in him, wonder boy? Why do your eyes sparkle? What did my old man do to earn Captain America’s worship?” Tony rattled on, getting dangerously riled up. “Howard’s dead, you little shit. Drove himself and my ma straight into a street light. Hit the gas pedal and wham! Totaled! Just like that!” He raised his palm. “Why don’t you have a taste?”

The wetness in Rogers' eyes became a full blown trickle of mute tears as Tony carried on speaking and Rhodey saw him charge his repulsor a fraction of a second too late.

There was a flash as a point blank shot hit the captain in the side of the head.

Stunned silence settled for a few moments as everyone registered what Tony had just done. Banner was first to react, kneeling down beside Steve, who was slumped on his knees, unconscious again, the handcuffs the only thing stopping him from being collapsed in a puddle on the floor.

“Dude, what the Hell?!” Rhodey’s exclamation came shakily out of War Machine's helmet.

“I liked my approach better,” Romanoff said, folding her arms across her chest.

“Was that really necessary?” Banner asked, letting out a cross between a deep breath and an exasperated sigh as he began to remove Cap's helmet, which had some fairly concerning looking scorch marks, accompanied with the smell of burnt hair. There was a livid red mark on his temple and his neck was hanging at an awkward angle where his head had ricocheted back and hit the wall.

Banner felt for his pulse and seemed at least partially mollified by what he found. From the angle that Steve had managed to work himself into, Rhodey could see the wound on his shoulder had reopened and was beginning to ooze again.

“Natasha, can I have the keys to those cuffs?” the doctor asked, holding out his hand without looking up.

“You sure that's a...”

“Keys. Now.” Rhodey tensed at the irritability in Banner's tone. “At least help me get him into a position where he can't a) choke on his own vomit and b) dislocate his shoulder if he wakes up and freaks out again.”

Romanoff handed over the keys reluctantly and they let him slide to the floor then pulled him onto his side. It wasn't as though there was much else they could do, other keep an eye on him and hope that when he woke up, he didn't pitch another fit.

“This isn’t about hurting his feelings,” Tony snapped at them, drawing a finger across the new tears that dragged like crayon lines across the hot rod red plating of his suit. “We were this close to dying, don’t you get it? What’s out there, we don’t stand a chance against it. None of us. Not all of us together.”

His voice rose to a crescendo. It was a thorny tone. He was clearly spooked by what he’d seen.
“You think I’ve been crawling through sewage vents on hands and knees for fun?”

“I think ...” And was it Rhodey's imagination or did Banner's eyes look a little green as he spoke? “That he was cufféd and stood a good chance of staying quiet and that there was absolutely no need to shoot him point blank in the head.”

“Well what's done is done now, there's no need to...” Rhodey decided to play bridge over troubled water, but the doctor wasn't buying it.

“Actually, I'm a bit more concerned right now with whether Steve wakes up with all his cognitive functions,” Banner snapped, effectively closing off any line of mitigating circumstances that Rhodey was about to plead.

The supersoldier moaned and shifted a little and Banner pulled off his jumper and slipped it under his head as a makeshift pillow, while Rhodey shepherded Tony to the other side of the room.

“So,” he began, when they were as out of earshot as they could be in a room that size, “You wanna get anything off your chest? Cause honestly, it's not like this is the first time I've seen you losing your shit.” He cleared his throat. “You just blasted an unarmed guy like he was a paper target stand. A guy who's supposed to be your friend. Wanna maybe talk to me about that?”

Tony looked at him like he wasn’t seeing the issue. Which was probably as close as it got. The man was clearly traumatized, was in the worst physical condition of his life and, to top it all off, was full of alien crack no doubt clouding his judgement and fucking around with his mood.

“I wanna talk to you about that.” Tony pointed to the caved in door. He didn’t have to say that it would have probably not survived another blow. If Jarvis hadn’t remotely piloted away the suit they’d have to deal with a lot worse than Cap’s newest hickey now.

“It’s D-day, Jim. You’re here. For the first time since the portal, it's palpable. Home.” Tony almost made it sound as though it was a letdown. That their coming on stage was just the crossover into another bleak chapter instead of the Happily Ever After. A twitch around the mouth. Tony licked his lips. “But you’re so massively underprepared that I don’t know how to get you all from here to there and back in one piece.”

He gave a dry, dull laugh and raised Iron Man’s left gauntlet, immobilized from the wrist down by Jarvis.

“I couldn’t even get myself there and back in one piece.”

Chapter End Notes

Tony showing off his impeccable first aid skills and crisis management. Give the man a hand. No pun intended.

We're back on Earth for this week's Easter Egg. If anyone's ever been curious about what the old Captain America museum looks like, you can check it out here.

It seems like whichever employee made the site has been a bit careless though. Maybe there's something up there that shouldn't be. I don't think the general public has noticed yet, but if you look hard enough, you might be able to find it. Devil's in the details, or in
this case, possibly in the source code of a specific page?

Thank you for reading and for letting us know your thoughts. You guys are the best. <3
Bruce stared after War Machine and Iron Man as they left through the buckled door, with Tony bristling even in his suit. He hoped that Rhodes would be able to talk him back down off the brink of whatever state he’d gotten himself riled up into. Convincing him that going out while the monsters were on the prowl had fallen on deaf ears. Tony insisted that the show had run its course by now. Whatever heads hadn’t rolled at this point were safe for the time being and why were they kicking up a fuss about him trying to blow off steam after lengthily criticizing him about immorally muzzling Steve, anyway?

Speaking of, Cap was peacefully unconscious and infinitely more comfortable on the floor, his head nestled against its makeshift pillow. If it weren't for the red mark on his forehead, he looked as though he’d laid down for a nap. It was striking how young he seemed when he wasn't wielding his air of 1940's style authority.

Bruce glanced up at Natasha, who was sat next to Steve's unconscious form. As far as he could tell, the captain was one of the people she counted as, if not a friend, then certainly an ally. Even through her impassive mask she looked distinctly unimpressed at the current situation.

“So,” he remarked without a trace of sincerity. “This is going spectacularly well.”

Natasha looked at him as if he'd just uttered the understatement of the century.

“You’re carrying sedatives, right?” she asked, but they both knew that the question was a formality only. He'd watched her check all the kits herself.

Natasha gave him a serious stare-down. “Look, this isn’t about social reintegration here. He’s shown that he’s not only unreliable, but dangerous.” She pointed at Cap for emphasis. “If it had been anyone but him, or you, it would have been a lethal blow.”

“And if it had been me, it would have been a lethal blow for everyone else in the room.” Bruce stared at the floor in discomfort. It wasn't a pleasant reality, but she was right. Tony had fired point black at Steve's head and the only thing that was stopping blood and cerebrospinal fluid from pouring out of his ears was a combination of that helmet and his biochemically enhanced ability to take a beating.

“You're not wrong. I just...” He sighed. “It's hard, Nat, you know? Seeing him like this.” Once he started talking, he realized that the words were tripping out. She had that effect on him. The cynic in him pointed out that she was good at getting people to talk. But he willed himself to trust her all the same.

“Four years, I've put everything on hold to help look for him. I don't even really know why. I barely knew the guy; but I liked him. And Pepper too. Maybe I thought we could at least bring his body home, shut the book on it. And then he turned out to be alive and that was better than we could have hoped. I just didn't think he'd be... like this. I get why he is, I think, but I wasn't prepared for it.”

Natasha wrinkled her nose. “I'm not saying euthanize him. Just get him off the edge. Fingers off the trigger. Let the specialists back home deal with whatever psychosis he’s developed. God knows he’s got the funds to seek out the best people for that. But right now he’s compromising an already
delicate situation. And he doesn’t even realize he’s doing it.” She pointed at the dented door first, and then the vent Tony had used to leave the room earlier. “I’m not convinced he’s fully accepted that this is reality and not just an extended head-trip.”

And he was definitely showing signs of it. Bruce had stopped counting how often Tony had bumped into them, seemingly oblivious to everyone else’s personal space. He was continuously getting up their noses, ignoring direct conversation when it didn’t suit him and startling at unannounced physical contact. The fact that he’d let Nat shave him was a silver lining, but they couldn’t rely on lurching from one lucid moment to the next.

Bruce began to voice a faint protest, or plead mitigating circumstances, but whatever less than convincing argument he’d started to form died in his throat as Steve rejoined the land of the living with a series of groans.

They watched him cautiously as his eyes fluttered open, Bruce tense and ready to dodge a blow, Natasha composed with one hand on her holster.

“Hey, Steve.” Bruce kept his voice low and calm. “You ok there?”

Cap blinked a few times in confusion, shifting over and eventually hauling himself up to a sitting position, his head in his hands as he groaned. “Dr Banner?” He ran his fingers gingerly through his blonde hair and winced. “Man, I had the craziest dream.”

“Yeah.” Bruce scrunched up his nose and decided it was best to say nothing more on that subject. “You know where you are?”

“Uhh...” Steve hesitated for a moment and Bruce tensed up, wondering if this was the moment he was supposed to back away. But then Cap continued, temperate. “Chitauri ship. Giant spider-thing. Don't remember much after that. Did I get knocked out? My head is killing me.”

Bruce let out a breath he didn’t realize he’d been holding and smiled with relief. Natasha’s posture returned from ready to strike to standby, her grip on the gun softening but not quite retracing from the holster.

“War Machine knocked you out first,” she summarized. “You were hallucinating, violently. Then after that we had a brush with one of the residents. You woke up but were non-compliant. You screwed our stealth approach.” She looked at him sternly, but there was no reproach in the gesture. “A diversionary maneuver later Iron Man KO’d you with a point-blank repulsor shot to the face.” She turned expectantly to Bruce. “Which is what we were just discussing on how to handle.”

Bruce shot Natasha a sharp look. Was there really any need to tell him the entire story? It was hardly going to improve team cohesion.

Steve rubbed at the livid patch on his forehead. “Tony shot me?” He gave the room a first thorough check and met their eyes with visible concern. “Where is he? Where’s Rhodes?”

“Uhm.” Bruce was suddenly mentally questioning the wisdom of just letting Tony and Rhodes go for a stroll unchallenged. “He's cooling off. War Machine is with him. I don't think...”

“You don’t think what?” Steve kept rubbing at the aftermath of Iron Man’s autograph.

Bruce faltered, opening and closing his mouth for a few seconds. Then he let out a long sigh. “Just forget Tony for a second. How are you feeling?”

“Dandy.” Steve pinned him with a glance. To his credit, a red mark and a couple of dark circles
under his eyes was the only evidence that remained of an ordeal which would have killed any other man twice over. “We need to talk about Stark.”

“He’s right,” Natasha backed up Steve, drawing a clear line between them and the pro-Tony movement, singularly represented by Bruce. “He’s had several panic attacks, dissociative episodes and now, aggressive tendencies, all in the course of a few hours. The way I’m seeing it, it’s a downward spiral. And personally, I don’t want to end up on the wrong side of his repulsor tech because he suddenly decides I’m a threat to him.”

Steve, blessed with a fresh memory of aforementioned experience, endorsed the allegation. “Find a way to restrain him, doc. Clearly he won’t be talked into surrendering the armor, but there must be a way to compromise it enough so he can’t harm us; or himself, for that matter.”

Bruce put his head in his hands. The problem was, nobody was saying anything that wasn’t sensible. He couldn't reliably guarantee that Tony wouldn't blow up at any moment and leaving lethal technology in his hands wasn't going to make the situation any less volatile.

“My vote still goes for sedatives,” Natasha insisted. “Jarvis can guide us through the necessary engineering. Between the four of us we’ll manage.”

“Jarvis won't help us if we KO Tony,” Bruce argued. Or at least, from what he knew of the AI, it was 50/50. Jarvis was programmed to be innately loyal to (and obey) one person. He wasn't going to take orders from anyone else unless he deemed it in accordance with what Tony would want. And Bruce strongly suspected that sedating Tony and slinging him over Cap’s shoulder probably didn't fit that bill.

Steve arched an eyebrow and Bruce held his hands up. “Seriously, he won't. And I don't know this tech well enough to fix the whole mainframe myself.” He thought for a moment. “I mean, maybe I could. But it would take days, weeks, to figure everything out and we don't have that kind of time.”

“Then we need to find a way to disarm him,” Steve said firmly.

“And what if we get attacked and he can't defend himself?” Bruce asked uneasily.

“He's still got a suit of armor. He's still got us looking out for him. I'd just feel a heck of a lot better not leaving that much firepower in the hands of someone who might lose it at any moment.”

“I’ll talk some sense into Rhodes,” Natasha said. “If there’s someone who can reach out to Stark it’s him. And if he can’t, he’d know how to short the suit.”

“Circumvent Jarvis?” Steve asked.

“I don’t know,” Natasha said. “Maybe? I don’t know the program well enough. But there has to be a way.”

Bruce looked at them both skeptically but kept his mouth shut. If he was feeling somewhat reluctant to disarm Tony, then he imagined that Rhodes would be even less receptive. On one hand, yes, they couldn't exactly ignore the fact that he was going around shooting his own team smack in the face. There was no doubt about the fact that Tony, in his current erratic presentation, was not someone you wanted to rely on watching your back. But on the other hand, he'd survived this long on the ship, alone and clearly at great cost, and expecting him to lead them into places he'd rather not venture to and then depriving him of the means to defend himself seemed unconscionably cruel. At very least, it probably wouldn't do Tony's mental state any favors.

Steve was eying the monster-sized dent in the door. “Where are they though? Cooling off? With that
thing out there? I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He got to his feet, dusted himself off, and popped his neck once. Then twice. “Shouldn’t we go after them?”

“We should probably catch them up,” Bruce agreed in a resigned tone. He was the last to clamber to his feet as Steve and Natasha were already making their way towards the door.

Wherever they’d taken their afternoon promenade, Rhodes and Tony had already looped back, because the lights from their respective suits were visible not too far up ahead. Both had their faceplates back and Tony looked, Bruce thought optimistically, if he squinted, slightly less agitated.

“Hey!” Steve called and Bruce made a series of frantic waving motions and a thumbs up behind him in an attempt to convey, in a sort of graceless makeshift semaphore, that Captain America no longer thought he was on a Nazi submarine and could Tony maybe please not shoot him. Steve glanced back over his shoulder with a puzzled look and Bruce shoved his hands back in his pockets.

It wasn’t evident if the look of relief on Rhodes’ face came from the fact that Tony didn’t blast Captain America to red, white and blue dust on sight or if he was just glad to be back from the stroll, but the Colonel visibly perked up at the sight of them.

It was notable to mention that both War Machine and Iron Man had been turned into something akin to two iron mules. Rhodes had two rocket launchers strapped in a criss-cross pattern to his back, arms full of carry-boxes brimming with the equivalent of Chitauri munition. Tony looked like Rambo ready for a trip to the Vietkong, wielding two wicked looking things that could best be described as alien upgraded AK-47s.

“Presents!” Tony announced jovially, unloading their bounty on a pile in front of the assembled team.

“This should even out the odds a bit,” Rhodes added, passing out weapons to everyone. When he outfitted Steve he paused slightly. “You good, Cap?”

Steve nodded, about to open his mouth when Tony cut in, a derogatory hand wave and a roll of his eyes. “Told ya. Pops right back up like a jack-in-the-box.”

Bruce frowned at Tony’s remark but the expression on his face was nothing compared to Steve’s, who looked downright homicidal.

“I see you boys have been shopping,” Natasha interrupted before Steve could say anything, her lips quirked upwards in her trademark smirk, but the amusement didn’t reach her eyes. Bruce noticed that she wasn’t letting Tony out of her line of sight and that the hand that was casually on her hip was within calculated easy reach of her pistol.

“Buy one get one free,” Rhodes remarked dryly, handing her an automatic weapon.

“You shouldn’t have,” she told him, mock-coquettish.

They divvied up the weapons between them, Bruce tucking Natasha’s now outdated pistol awkwardly into the waistband of his pants as he left the larger guns for the rest of the team. If he got drawn into a combat situation then by that point things had probably gone far enough to shit that heavy artillery wouldn’t do them much good.

He was about to attempt to pull Tony to one side when Natasha caught his arm. For a split second, he felt a lurch in his chest at the unexpected physical contact and tried to shake off the blush that was no doubt forming. She looked at him for a moment, reached around his waist slowly, so that their torsos were almost touching and his heart hammered wildly in his chest. Then she pulled the gun out
that he'd tucked away and flicked a switch on the side.

“You left the safety off,” she said briskly, handing the weapon back with a faintly puzzled look as he cycled through several shades of crimson.

“Oh. Right. Thanks.” He cleared his throat and rammed the stupid thing back in his waistband. Steve looked vaguely amused.

“Colonel Rhodes.” Natasha was already striding up ahead, apparently oblivious to the puddle of embarrassed doctor she'd left in her wake. “A word, if you have a sec?”

Steve, clearly wanting to be privy to that conversation, followed her, leaving Bruce and Tony straggling behind.

“So.” Bruce nodded in the vague direction of Cap's back. “Maybe could we make a new roadtrip rule? Just throwing a few ideas out there, but possibly something like ‘Don’t shoot your teammates in the head with repulsor tech’?”

Tony did not seem to grasp the gravity of his actions. He chewed on his bottom lip, muttered something unintelligible into his suit’s mic before turning to Bruce with a grin, almost as if he expected a high five.

“He’s fine! Peachy keen. Won’t leave as much as a hickey.” He laughed, raising his left arm whose gauntlet was empty. “Oh boy, you should see my uppercut. He’d go flyyy-ing! High arch. Like a punted football.”

He’d obviously made some kind of transition from raging mad to manic elation, but it was hard to tell whether the mood whiplash was a result of Rhodes’ de-escalation attempts or Jarvis’ pharmaceutical helping hand. The AI had been keeping suspiciously silent throughout the entirety of Tony’s latest escapades. Bruce wondered if it was on purpose, or if Tony had forcibly muted Jarvis.

Tony, meanwhile, kept on babbling, following the others in a quick, jerky gait, gesticulating broadly while the deep claw marks in his armor kept striking sparks as the damaged interiors malfunctioned in various grades.

“… and I was, ‘my house, my rules’, right? So I had him hand me over the laser shells and we soldered shut the way back, nice and smooth, you know, no more annoying creepers, kind of like that chick did in that movie, block off all the sideways, smoke ‘em out like ants, right? I did that, you know, once. Took me three days to lock that sucker away, a love bite all the way from here to here, you’ve seen it of course, but no pain no gain, that’s how it goes, doesn’t it? 1:0 for Team Stark.” He pointed up ahead at Steve's back, all lopsided grin. “1-0 for Team Stark, you get it? Touchdown, baby, KO on the first punch.”

Bruce was half walking, half jogging in an effort to keep up with Iron Man's stride. “Tony, please ,” he implored behind him, as the other man carried on talking at ninety miles an hour to nobody in particular. He tried to catch him by the arm but Iron Man's hydraulics meant that he stood no chance of slowing him down.

“Tony, we need to talk about...” Bruce was struggling with the pace, feeling like the asthmatic kid who was picked last for sports.

They caught up with Rhodes and the others just in time to get within earshot of Natasha's voice cutting crisply through the air.

“-and I'm not saying take the suit from him altogether, just disarm the weapons. Surely you can see
why we need to do that.”

“Do what?” Tony had sidled up to the group, ignorant of Bruce’s fruitless attempts to cue him in. “You filling them in on the after-party logistics, Jim? Sugary cocktails with little straw hats on a private Maldives beach? Could have been my idea, pal!” He patted a distinctly less enthusiastic Rhodes on the back.

Steve and Natasha exchanged a look before dropping the bombshell. Telling Tony Stark to shut down the combat functions on his suit for his own good was a tricky request.

In the end, things went as they had to; Steve being blunt, Rhodes trying to mitigate and Tony on the draw and repulsors up, although to his credit, not charged.

“You want what? Are you out of your fucking mind?”

“Tony…” Rhodes was interjecting.

“No! Are you listening to this? Are you even listening? I’m saving your asses, I’m risking my life here! And you hand me out on a silver platter? Gotta close the portal. Close it now! Jesus Christ. Not all over again. Not with me.” He took a step back, eyes wide and pink. “I know you people. You sorry little ingrates.”

Bruce hung back and listened to the entire exchange in miserable silence, anticipating only one outcome and not feeling at all vindicated when his predictions turned out to be correct. He wasn’t pleased to note that nobody else, perhaps barring whatever was going on beneath War Machine's mask, looked as uncomfortable as he felt over Tony's mention of the portal.

In the end, as with so many things in Bruce's life, it was the nagging of guilt that drove him to act. “But do we really have to?”

Natasha and Steve both looked at him like he'd lost his mind and he tried to ignore the frank admonishment on their faces. He sighed in exasperation as Steve opened his mouth, no doubt to make an entirely justified proclamation about Tony's sanity. “I know,” Bruce preempted, “But we still can't just disarm him. Not here, not now, not after everything. It's not right.”

“It's going to get us killed,” Steve responded flatly, his face a mask of open disapproval as he stared down Bruce, who was struck by just how tall the other man was.

“He's survived on this ship for years,” Rhodes pointed out. “We just got here. Things are fucked up. Give him a chance.” And of course, nobody was looking at Rhodes like he was a lunatic because there was that easy conviction in his voice, the calm confidence of a man who was used to giving orders and used to having people follow them.

“Give him a chance,” Tony parroted. “Give him a chance! Who do you think you are, going over my head? You bullycrats. My game, my turf, my rules!” He was getting increasingly agitated as his rant picked up pace, admittedly not a peak display as far as his credibility went.

Steve and Natasha exchanged an anxious glance at the continued display of twitchy repulsor units. It was hard to tell if they had truly invested a glimmer of hope in the notion of a peaceful disarmament of Iron Man, or if they were simply worried that Tony might go off like a clean-energy sparkler at any moment. Which was, at this point, a probable conclusion.

Rhodes had his hands up in a placatory gesture. “Ok. Ok. Utterly uncalled-for brain fart.” He gave Tony a pleading look. “Why don’t you have Jarvis turn off combat-mode? Take five, level down a bit. We can talk.”
“Talking behind my back is what you do!” Tony spat. “Like I don’t know.” He narrowed his eyes, cagey. All the progress they’d made to refamiliarize him with reality seemed to have flown out of the window. “It’s about the ship. You just want the login. All my data.”

Steve threw his hands wide in exasperation. “He’s out to lunch. I told you.”

“Steve, that is not helpful,” Bruce murmured, as everyone collectively, and not very subtly, tried to maneuver out of range of what appeared to be Tony’s impending armed and dangerous meltdown.

“Nobody is trying to...” Natasha began, but Bruce held up a hand. After the fiasco with the device she’d used to fry the systems in the first place, he didn’t think that anything she had to say on that particular subject would end with Tony acquiescing to reason.

None of this was working. They were quickly ending up in two separate factions, with Nat and Steve wanting to knock Tony out and drag him planetside like a sack of potatoes and Rhodes and Tony happy to continue their armored road trip. And Bruce stuck in the middle, as per usual, trying to balance his discomfort at the situation with the fact that, objectively, Tony was a total fucking liability in his current state.

There was one not exactly neutral but infinitely more rational arbitrator left to call on.

“Tony, what's Jarvis saying to all of this?” He tried to avoid addressing the AI directly, given that Tony had just blown up at them for talking over his head. But really, he hoped that Jarvis might weigh in, get through to him in a way that the rest of the group seemed to be missing.

“What’s he saying, what’s he doing?” Tony’s eyes were saucers against a sickly grey canvas. Beads of sweat trailed down his temple, a caged animal seeing only the bars surrounding it. “Changing encryption, transferring data, calculating, re-calculating, running the sim like I want him to. Protecting, regulating, executing.”

Steve took a deliberate step forward, obviously fed up with the excursion into Tony’s psychosis. “You’re going to calm down now,” he said and, shockingly, managed to keep the temper out of his voice and the addendum of ‘or I’ll make you’ a silent postscript. Admittedly, it was in all of their interests to keep Iron Man from entering active combat mode. Once those repulsors fired up it was going to be a free for all - with an inevitably high blood toll to pay when the dust settled.

“I’m done taking orders from you,” Tony snapped at Steve and shut went his faceplate. They could hear him from behind his layers of armor, Iron Man’s tinny machinist voice sounding out through his speakers. “I had to cut my damn hand off to survive - I’m not throwing away my only protection because you’re getting cold feet!”

It was as loquacious as Tony had been on the subject of his missing forearm and the collective silence which fell was instant and deafening. Bruce, for his part, had feared, if not suspected, that the story had, like everything else about Tony’s existence on the ship, an added layer of unspoken trauma. If nothing else, it explained the burn scars he’d seen earlier. But hearing it out loud was a different matter.

Rhodes looked aghast, like the only thing holding him back from putting an arm around his friend's shoulders and ushering him away was the fact that Tony's gauntleted hands still glowed with the threat of a yet-unleashed blast.

Steve seemed equally uncomfortable, for his part. Whatever he'd been about to say died in his throat as they all took in the magnitude of what Tony had just said. Bruce was clearly not the only one picturing an image of Tony, alone and bleeding and forced, through some horrific circumstances, to
“How?” Bruce had blurted the question out before he had the chance to self filter.

And maybe it was Bruce's lack of tact or the offset realization on Tony’s part what colossal secret he’d just inadvertently blabbed out, but something suddenly shifted, as if an invisible reset-button had been pushed.

Iron Man’s hands dropped and the voice ringing through the speakers came in a beaten, meek tone. “What?”

Rhodes stepped up, the vigilance abruptly gone. Out of all of them he was the only one possibly privy to what was going on beneath Tony’s faceplate, if their private communication channel was still up. Either that or, judging from the amicable way he looped an arm around Tony’s shoulders and was furtively making ‘back off’ gestures with his free hand, maybe the person on the other end of his comm link wasn’t Iron Man’s owner, but his ever present AI.

“Is your suit glitching, man?” Rhodes was asking, forcibly breezy. “What’s with that scowl? You just got a beauty makeover, pop back the faceplate.”

Bruce kept his distance along with Natasha and Steve, who were both exchanging worried looks and clearly suppressing the urge to start conferring with one another. It vaguely annoyed him and he wasn't sure why. Perhaps he just wanted Tony to be alright so badly that anyone else pointing out that he clearly wasn't was exactly what he didn't want to hear. Except, he had to keep reminding himself, this wasn't about him, or what he wanted to hear, or the fact that he'd been pursuing this outcome for the last four years of his life.

This was about getting everyone home in one piece.

At least Rhodes seemed to know what to do, how to handle things.

As Tony's faceplate slid back, it became apparent that so did Jarvis. And the answer to managing the situation appeared to be in pharmaceutical form, as Tony's wide, wild eyes took on a slightly more heavy lidded appearance, his pupils shrinking even in the semi-darkness of their surroundings.

Bruce locked eyes with Nat for a split second and nodded. A 'we're good here' that she seemed to pick up on the meaning of. He really hoped they were.

Rhodes had Iron Man by the arm, looking for all the world as though he were propping his friend up after a heavy night at the bar, instead of through a hostile alien mothership. He was saying something that seemed to be eliciting a vaguely contented laugh from Tony's now slack lips, whatever cocktail Jarvis had administered via the suit taking effect at a rapid pace.

Natasha followed behind them, keeping just enough of a distance to remain unobtrusive, while still keeping an eye and ear on them.

Which left Bruce and Steve bringing up the rear, the latter looking like he'd just licked piss off a nettle. Bruce could understand his concern, his reservations about the mission going forward, but he was struggling to put his finger on exactly why the supersoldier seemed suddenly so angry.

Although to be fair, he had tried to choke Bruce out while tripping on spider venom not more than a few hours previously. It was entirely possible that he wasn't feeling wholly himself either. Which meant that this ship was heading even less and less for pretty waters.

“Hey Steve,” Bruce began, lengthening his stride to keep up with the other man. “You holding up ok
Steve shot back a look as if he’d accidentally been mistaken for the wrong person. Wasn’t it as clear as day which member of the team was the weak link in the chain? But he pulled himself together before formulating an answer, and there was genuine honesty in his next words.

“It’s getting tough to stay on top of things. Hostile space setting aside...” He pointed a nod at Tony, who was tottering up ahead. “He’s really giving me a headache.” Steve let out a laugh and rolled his eyes. “Gave me one. Literally.”

And it was starting to show. Erskine’s wonder serum aside, the encounter with a justifiably upset spider-matriarch had drained even some of his reserves, and Tony’s unorthodox detox protocol hadn’t really helped his recovery. Cap began to look a little worse for wear than the simple victim of a mild concussion.

“I’ll be fine,” he assured Bruce in a much more even, rehearsed tone. “All I want is to get everyone off this ship. Alive, preferably.”

“I know,” Bruce said in an equally even tone. He was starting to feel as though he was treading on eggshells around everyone, except perhaps Rhodes, who was taking the situation in his stride far more than anyone else. “It's just that, well, you did get poisoned and then KO'd twice in a relatively short space of time.”

He continued apologetically, “I know you have enhanced healing but...” It was his job as team medic to check, wasn't it? Was that even his role? He still wasn't completely sure why SHIELD had insisted on sending him along in the first place and finding out that everyone bar Rhodes seemed to have some kind of ulterior motive for being here wasn't exactly soothing his doubts.

Maybe this was like Coulson's death and those trading cards all over again. A ploy for Fury to throw them all together and solidify them as a team. Maybe that would have worked the first time if Tony hadn't been trapped on the wrong side of a portal and if they’d found a way to quash the Chitauri invasion without quite such a profound loss of life and if SHIELD hadn't been backed into a corner in the aftermath and publicly executed Thor's brother. Maybe things would have been different.

Maybe not.

He smiled at Steve wanly. “Just checking, I suppose. It's a weird day at the office. I guess we all need to look out for each other.”

Chapter End Notes

Pop the champagne bottle, we've surpassed 500 reviews - thanks to YOU!

To celebrate we've prepared a platter of fermented space whale antipasti, Chitauri gourmet style, so let's all not disappoint Tony and dig in.

As for this chapter's Easter Egg... the secret is leaked, the milk is spilled, the mystery around Tony's missing forearm begins to clear up. And it's not pretty. This story isn't supposed to be all rainbows and unicorns, so have yourself some slightly more visceral concept art today.
As always, we love your continued support and feedback and hope you keep enjoying the Chitauri fun ride!
Jarvis hadn’t been joking with his initial assessment back in Fort Stark; by the time they crossed the finish line of what Tony had dubbed the Death March, the time stamp on War Machine’s HUD read ‘finafuckinally’ and Rhodey murmured a relieved hallelujah.

That the last leg of the journey had ended up consisting of dragging a sedated Iron Man along on a ride he wasn’t too thrilled to be a part of. Trying to keep him in good spirits and cooperative had added a layer of difficulty to the whole endeavor which Rhodey counted among the more aggravating parts of the trip so far.

But it was still infinitely better than Tony playing skeet shooting with their heads. Which, according to Jarvis, who was doing the telephone game with Rhodey over the HUD, was the other pick if they didn’t keep him complacent. Tony had become prone to aggressive flare-ups when upset, Jarvis said, and there was only so much pharmaceutical assistance the AI could lend without completely zapping Tony’s overheated neurons.

It was a piece of information Rhodey decided to keep between the three of them. Or rather the two of them, really; Tony wasn’t mentally rooted enough to play co-conspirator at the moment. He let himself be humored about old MIT frat stories and would occasionally impart his conviction about sinking Captain America in a Las Vegas wrestling ring if he ever got the chance, but that was pretty much what his conception of reality looked like at this point. Fratagonia and going one up on Dwayne ‘The Rock’ Johnson.

The Main Deck, or rather the Engineering Sub-Basement, which they were currently setting up camp in was a deserted miniature version of Fort Stark. ‘Food’ containers were stacked up in a corner, a makeshift cot hidden away behind some possibly-alien computers, and a whole set of new wall and floor decorations, both in halfway sane English and strange, hieroglyph-looking shapes that could have been the Chitauri equivalent of Tic Tac Toe for all Rhodey understood of them.

Upon arrival Tony had been clear enough in the head to take one long look at the hulking apparatus dominating the room and compared the task of fixing Romanoff’s handiwork to trying to cook a souffle in a panini press. Together with an abducted Banner he slinked off to, so Rhodey hoped, get started on whatever repairs needed to be done.

The fact that fifteen minutes later only Banner was tinkering with the alien tech and Tony was sat next to him, still clad in full Iron Man regalia, and had somehow veered from explaining Chitauri electronics to recounting Star Wars chronology and fantasizing about chocolate frosted donuts (with sprinkles) left Rhodey with the queasy feeling in his stomach that they were going to spend a good while longer on this battle cruiser than anyone really wanted to.

Even Rogers looked too exhausted to even muster up a disapproving comment. If nothing else, the lull in proceedings allowed for a break and a restock. It was shaping up to be a long night and beyond that, there was no telling how long those rations had to last them.

Romanoff, self-appointed distributor, produced a protein bar from her pack and split it in three, offering it to Rhodey and Rogers respectively.

Rhodey accepted her gift gratefully. If nothing else, it was nice to be stranded on an enemy warship
with a full belly. “Thanks, Agent Romanoff,” he said.

“Natasha. We're stuck in space together,” she pointed out. “I think that merits first-name basis by this point.”

“Natasha, then. It’s Jim, or Rhodey.” He laughed and nodded as he chewed on the bar, unable to help think about Tony’s earlier attempt at eating and how it had backfired on him. He was fairly grateful that Tony’s current interests lay in pestering Banner with whatever pseudo sci-fi theories he had come up with over the years rather than salivating like a dog while the rest of the team got some much needed calorie supplementation.

“By my reckoning, we've been here over thirty hours,” Natasha said. “Since not all of us have superhuman abilities or access to alien uppers, we might want to consider sleeping in shifts while we can.”

She sat down on the floor, back propped against the wall and motioned to the cot in the corner, which looked about as clean as Tony had when they'd first pulled him out of his Chitauri exoskeleton.

“Doc, any word on those repairs?” Steve called over hopefully, clearly not thrilled with the idea of them being stuck for the duration.

There was a long pause and a noncommittal grunt from Bruce. Tony barely broke from his ramblings to deliver a similar shrug.

“I guess we're sitting this one out, then,” the captain surmised, taking his place beside Natasha with a resigned sigh.

“Why don’t you take the first nap?” Rhodey suggested, nodding at Steve who was barely touching his third of a meal. “You look about as healthy as an upside-down goldfish.”

Truth was they were all tired. Tony’s abode was everything but a luxury retreat and even going by the slim chance of him being able to fix the lockdown without further incident, they were looking at another long hike to the shuttle, and Rhodey had to be awake enough by then to safely pilot them out of the ship’s hangar and not into the nearest wall. On second thought, if Cap wasn’t going to take that nap, then Rhodey would.

From over in the nerds’ corner Tony’s hearty laugh resounded, shortly followed by an exasperated sigh on Bruce’s part.

“Well,” Rhodey commented dryly. “Looks like someone’s having a good time.”

“Yeah, it’s a real party in here,” Natasha muttered with a raised eyebrow.

Steve, meanwhile, was looking as though he was seriously considering the filthy cot. “You know, maybe half an hour of shut eye wouldn’t hurt.”

“You’re gonna get lice if you sleep on that thing,” Natasha pointed out. She began arranging a makeshift nest from her jacket and anything vaguely soft they were carrying in their packs.

“Don't worry about it,” Steve dismissed her with a laugh, but he looked faintly grateful. “I survived the Second World War... well, most of it. I think I can handle sleeping on the floor.”

“Must've been crazy.” She looked at him contemplatively, cocking her head to one side.
“Depends which part you mean,” he replied. “The war itself felt more normal, I guess, than anything that came after. That part was familiar, the rest of it, not so much.” He looked up at Rhodey. “You get it, right?”

Of course Rhodey did. You went out on the field and did your job, rattling off manoeuvres that you had drilled into your head until they became second nature. You’d be able to recount them, point and comma, when the 2am wake-up call came because some Afghan goat herder had farted suspiciously in his cave and sir, could that be a potential hostile act towards the United States of America and the free world?

Rhodey hadn’t fought against Nazi Germany, but the drill was the same. Pulling the trigger was the easy part; you did it to be faster than the other guy and you didn’t think twice about it, because you knew your opponent wouldn’t hesitate either. It was coming home, trying to shut off the kill-switch that so many veterans struggled with. Rhodey imagined the added frustration of having to come to terms with one’s inner soldier while being faced with a seventy year time-lapse. Life hadn’t been easy on Captain America after his retrieval from the Arctic, that was for sure.

“I get it,” he said eventually, forcing a smile. “Bet you never thought you’d end up in space though, back in the forties. They hadn’t even shot up Armstrong yet.” He gestured around them, to the alien tech and their resident scientists. “And here we are, having a picnic on the real-life version of Starship Enterprise. The experts over on ISS would get green in the face if they knew a bunch of amateurs were prancing about outside of orbit.”

Steve chuckled awkwardly. “Yeah, I thought they were joshing me when they told me we’d sent a man into space.”

“Well, technically the Russians did that first,” Natasha countered with a half grin.

“Space, moon, whatever. I missed out on the Cold War too, so no point in getting territorial with me.” The captain laughed. He might have eschewed Natasha's offers of a soft place to rest his head, but it didn’t seem to stop him from commandeering Rhodey's backpack as a pillow. He lay on his back and stared up at the ceiling, looking heavy lidded and clearly suppressing a yawn.

“Now would be a good time to tell me you brought a deck of cards,” Natasha shot in Rhodey's direction. “Otherwise our in-flight entertainment for this cruise is going to be… that.” She nodded at Tony and Bruce. The former was in full flow about something which, judging by Bruce’s expression, was genuine gibberish and not just how he usually sounded when he was waxing lyrical about his engineering projects.

“Oh, heaven forbid, I’m not listening to that any longer than I have to.” Rhodey rolled his eyes in mock desperation, feeling genuine pity for Bruce at having to endure one of Tony’s more ecstatic harangues about all and sundry. “I shared a room with him at MIT. I’ve maxed out on his theorems on lightsaber physics.” He shrugged, offering her an apologetic look. “The poker deck didn’t make it through the pack shakedown either I’m afraid. But I guess we can get a game of hangman on the go if you’re really desperate?”

But they didn’t have time to get into a Russia vs USA showdown on the world’s first extra-terrestrian pen and paper championship as a now armor-less Tony and a visibly exhausted Bruce trotted over.

Tony plopped down beside Rhodey and wiped at his eyes before announcing flamboyantly: “Well, I’m gonna call it a night. Done my do. I’m about ready to be tucked in.”

Rhodey raised an eyebrow. “You’re finished with the repairs already?”
“Do I look like the wizard of Oz?” Tony scrunched his nose, pointing to where Iron Man now sat propped up against a console, wires and cables running from the suit into what Rhodey suspected was the space version of a desktop computer.

“Jav needs to sort through the OS first,” Tony elaborated, which didn’t exactly make Rhodey any wiser. “Will take a while. We’re not exactly on hi-speed broadband anymore since… that stunt.” He gestured vaguely at Natasha, but at least this time there was nothing all too biting about his commentary.

Tony clapped his thigh and took a deep breath. “Alright, kids. No feeding stray aliens, no late night cake-walks. War Machine on sentry?”

Rhodey looked to where his armor was positioned next to the door they’d come through, eye slits glowing. “He’s got our backs.”

“Splendid,” Tony assessed. “Wake me with a kiss.”

Bruce looked like he genuinely wished he was dead as Tony flopped down into his filthy cot. Even the doc’s initial enthusiasm for alien tech seemed to have finally met its match in the form of exhaustion.

There was a long awkward silence which was shortly punctuated by the sound of Tony snoring obnoxiously.

“Aww, he's all tuckered out,” Natasha observed wryly and really, sarcasm aside, the whole mission was starting to feel like the nightmare dystopian version of the babysitter's club.

“Good thing for Jarvis.” Bruce spoke in something other than frustrated grunts for the first time in hours. “This code would take days to sift through.”

“Yeah, it’s a pretty nifty piece of kit.” Steve nodded towards Iron Man.

“Jarvis?” Bruce seemed slightly surprised at Steve's choice of words. “He's far more than that.”

“We're not talking about a fancy operating system here,” Natasha supplemented. “Tony's AI is the first thing that's ever come close to genuine artificial intelligence.”

“So it's a really, really, nifty piece of kit?” Steve wasn't quite getting it.

“Try sentient,” Rhodey said.

Natasha raised an eyebrow. “You really think so? Not just a sophisticated mimic? Not just the groundwork?” She seemed suddenly more alert at the turn in conversation, some cogs turning in her head that only she was privy to.

“Maybe that's more of a philosophical question than a scientific one.” Bruce yawned, removing his glasses and rubbing at his eyes with the back of his hand. “But certainly, if not for Jarvis’ company, Tony would have lost it up here. I'm sure of that.”

“Your saying he hasn't?” Steve's question came out as a disbelieving snort.

“Trust me, I've seen what solitary confinement does to men,” Natasha said ominously. “He’s unstable, definitely a liability, but he could be a lot worse.”

Rhodey looked from Natasha to a zonked out Tony and decided that if four years as an alien POW
didn’t classify as bad he really didn’t want to know what ‘a lot worse’ meant in Black Widow’s book.

“I just want to see him off this ship,” Rhodey said. “And preferably into detox. For… whatever he’s been taking.”

“SHIELD will take care of that,” Natasha assured, though something had changed in her demeanor. She kept looking across at Iron Man, as if the suit was boon and bane at once.

Steve had propped his head on his elbow, trying to find the merest hint of comfort on the floor. He looked quizzically at Bruce, who was the only one still awake enough to fill them in on the goings-on.

“So this means we’re doing what now, exactly? Wait for Tony to catch up on his beauty sleep? What’s Jarvis doing? Someone translate the shop jargon into plain English for me?”

“Uhhh...” Bruce looked as though stringing a sentence together was going to be hard enough for him at his stage, let alone putting whatever they’d been up to for the past few hours into lay terms, particularly for the benefit of someone from the 1940’s.

“So imagine if your computer got a virus and it corrupted a whole load of files. And you could go through all those files one by one yourself and restore them. Or, you could get a program to automate the process. At this point, it’s kind of like that, but, um, worse. And instead of a program, it's Jarvis doing the heavy lifting.” He rested his head against the wall and sighed. “Most of the physical repairs are sorted. And we've pinpointed the problems, I think. It's just a case of, hopefully, getting the Chitauri equivalent of Windows back up and running.”

“You don't sound overly confident, doc,” Steve pointed out with some trepidation, although his tone was milder.

“I'm doing my best.” And the unspoken part of that, the way Bruce looked slightly guiltily in Tony's direction before he spoke, seemed to mean ‘under the circumstances’, with Tony adding both help and hindrance to the mix.

“Good enough for me.” Clearly the captain could acknowledge that by this point they were all, in their own ways, running on empty. “I'll take first watch if you guys want to get some rest.”

“None of us got snacked on today by a giant spider,” Natasha pointed out with a wan smile. “Give your pillow some head, Cap. You look as though you need it.”

Siesta was as uneventful as possible on a creepy space horror trip. Evidently four years of limited maintenance were starting to leave marks on the state of preservation of the place. Pipes hissed, structures creaked, the lighting buzzed on and off in accord with the ambiance.

Rhodey was splitting graveyard shift with Widow while Cap and Bruce were catching up on some much needed sleep. Tony still dozed like a baby on an overdose of cough syrup, his sniffs and snores only occasionally interrupted by the odd murmur or two. The only one (hopefully) pegging away at his job was Jarvis, although it was hard to tell whether he made any progress or not; Iron Man was sat silently in his corner like a punished kid in the classroom.

“So what’s up with Hawkeye?” Rhodey asked out of the blue, boredom taking hold. “I wouldn’t have minded some of his poor attempt at humor right now.”

“Out of action,” Natasha replied tersely, a curt explanation which was blatantly not the whole story. “He's rehabbing a broken leg. And a few other injuries. Even Fury wasn't dumb enough to send a
one-legged archer into space. Although that might be the beginning and end of his sensible decisions where this mission was concerned.” As if to illustrate her point, she glanced briefly at Bruce who was curled up in the corner, deceptively small looking despite being, by all accounts, a walking time bomb.

Not for the first time, it was apparent that there was very little about this mission which was remotely orthodox.

She looked back at Rhodey and softened a little. “I could do with some of his crappy puns too. Besides, I always feel a little better when he's there watching my back.”

Steve's voice chimed in, apparently awake and annoyingly refreshed after a few measly hours. “How did he end up injured anyway?”

Natasha smiled without any hint of mirth. “He was watching my back.”

“Well, I’m sure he’s making Fury’s life Hell for leaving him off the team roster on this one,” Rhodey said. He opened his mouth to offer up another quip on the idea of a space Robin Hood when Jarvis suddenly burst into a series of alarms, Iron Man blinking in its foreboding signal red warning lights.

“Wha…?!” Tony had shot up from his cot, tumbling half drunkenly to his suit while the rest of the team grabbed whatever weapons lay within their reach.

Natasha was on her feet in a split second, Steve was barking questions, Bruce was hurriedly groping around for his glasses in a state of confusion and, in the middle of it all, Iron Man, hooked up with electrical veins and arteries to the mainframe, emitted a series of increasingly off key beeps. Rhodey was reminded of a dying animal. The look of dawning horror on Tony's face was not reassuring anyone.

“What’s happening?” Steve wanted to know.

Tony answered in a series of grunts, rubbing at his face in an attempt to blink himself awake. He mock slapped Iron Man across the cheek. “Jarv? J, talk to me. Where’s the fire?”

And that was when the entire console blew. Tony’s arms shot up to shield himself from the worst of the sparks. The entire row of twenty three green lights which had been gradually illuminating one by one turned back an angry shade of red.

Jarvis’ voice came bleating out, distorted and warped as the HUD lights from behind Iron Man's faceplate flickered and died. “Malfunction… holding cells… sir…”

Tony voiced out loud the expression on Rhodey's face. “Fuck. Fuck.”

Tony was a flurry of activity, pulling at and reconnecting wires like a man possessed, imploring with Jarvis to answer him. Rhodey stared at the lights on the mainframe like he could see his own death in a crystal ball, while Steve and Natasha exchanged looks filled with confusion and trepidation.

And in the middle of it all stood a cold, dark, red and gold statue, not a trace of light or life in the suit save for a dying spark which traveled down the center of the chestplate and fell to the floor in a lonely arc, a single firework extinguished on the cold concrete.

The horrified silence was only broken by the dull thud of Tony sinking to his knees.

So, some time in early 2016, an amateur hobbyist radio operator in New York intercepted an odd message and eventually it wound up in our hands. Don't ask us how. We get a lot of chatter, comes with the territory while we've been trying to piece together an account of these tragic events, but we think that this one might actually be relevant to your interests.

Thank you, as always, for checking in and letting us know what you think. I know we say it every week, but reading your comments is always the highlight of our respective weeks. <3
Chapter 13

Chapter Notes

Tony's going some pretty dark places here. Tags have been updated with appropriate warnings. Pick one that suits you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

“It's a dangerous, violent game. When you're down there in the field. In the trenches. You have to hang in that pocket and look down the gun barrel. You have to have the weapons,” the broadcaster says.

They look out over to the ten yard line and Tony hoots. 99-yd bomb. In the red zone. What a game. What a spirit!

“A fight between the Pittsburgh Steelers and the Baltimore Ravens. A game for men. Into town comes the Pittsburgh Steeler defense. The most violent linebackers in football. Playmakers all over the place, and they know what to do.”

But the Baltimore Ravens will win the battle. Ray Rice, dynamite running back — literally the catalyst for this Ravens offense. The Steelers cannot handle any of it. They look long in the tooth.

“There’s nothing pretty about the Ravens’ way. Even the Ravens will admit that,” the commentator says and Tony lip-syncs. He knows it by heart now. The one game they have a recording of.

“Listen up, J,” he prompts just before the miracle line.

“But you can’t live in the past,” says the sportscaster, says Jarvis through voice emulation, says Tony to the empty hangar bay that isn’t a football field, not if you squint. It doesn’t even have gravity!

“You live in the past, you die in the past. You've got to put in the work and come together.”


“Do Hap now,” he cues. “I’d be down for some Happy time.”

“Get your hands up! Where’s your defense?” Oh Lordy, he can almost picture the mullet. Iron Man with an 80’s hair-crime. It’s too good.

“You’re hanging in the ropes, man,” Harold Hogan once said and he keeps repeating it now, whenever Tony wants him to. “It ain’t over till it’s over, champ.”

“Damn right,” Tony agrees with a nod. He jabs a finger to where Moby Dick is languishing in its microgravity holding pen. “I’m gonna outlive you, you stupid fish. Last One Standing - that’s Tony Stark for you, you squidgy motherfucker.”

“Maybe you should consider nutrition then, sir.” Jarvis has reverted to his usual British tone. He’s distinctly less good company when he keeps telling Tony what to do and not the other way around.
“I’m over food, J,” Tony says, trails a finger across his bony throat. “I’m ready for the noose, buddy. Get me some wire, get me some rope. We’ll wind it, thirteen coils, tight and bright, and you’ll serve it up with breakfast tomorrow morning.”

Tony is caught in the loop, in the coils, a hare in a snare, J and Iron Man beside him like limp carcasses. There is background noise, muffled voices that don’t quite make it through the invisible bubble that envelops the three of them. Inside, the smoke coming from Iron Man’s plating rises in wisps around him. Death stench. Tony’s throat constricts around a lungful of the vapor. The rich taste of Cubans. It reminds him of Obie, scotch and cigars and a multi-million deal in the pocket.

“Tony!” Obie, not Bruce, claps him proudly on the back. “Tony, what a day!”

Today. The. Big. Day. A thick red mark in the calendar.

Anniversary party.

Tony is freshly groomed; slick hairdo, trimmed goatee, pinstripe suit - Armani, not pokey. Nothing but the best on jubilee. He has an image to uphold. Tony Stark, fucking national martyr.

“How’d I look?” he asks his very own Magic Mirror, flattening out the wrinkles in his shirt. Not to lay it on thick, but the ladies are gonna swoon. Goodbye lovehandles - a restrictive diet works wonders if you let it. That’s the downfall of so many regimes; you don’t stick to them. But not so Tony, because when he puts something in his head, he pulls through to the bitter end. Flies over the moon with it. Right past Sinatra, ha!

“The very image of a gentleman, sir,” Jarvis says dutifully.

Iron Man’s ocular servos whir. Take it in nice and slow, Tony thinks. That’s what TIME wants on their cover: successful, suave, cut from just the right cloth. He’s ticking off all the boxes and then some. Tony grins, showing a flash of even, white teeth. He can already picture the paparazzi lapping it up.

“That’s right.” Slick as snot on a doorknob. All others are down-and-out. The show floor is his, and his alone.

“I’m worried about the wound on your neck, sir,” Jarvis continues. Of course he’d have something to critique. It can’t be all praise and glory. Jarvis is a goddamn mud-slinger.


“The Phantom ready to go?” Nothing can beat the soft purr of a finely tuned 6L V12. Maybe the twin turbo of the e-tron Spyder, but no bets on that. He never did get to pick up that order.

“Toxication levels unclassifiable,” Jarvis grouches. “Sir, my recommendation of preventive isolation remains effective until vitals stabilize.”

“I’ll scrape by,” Tony says. “You can’t ground me.” J is starting to run down his nerves. This is important, can’t he see? Tony is all shebang. So what if he skips the bullet-proof? Even the bad guys have to bunk off from time to time.

“I’m going,” he decides, his will set in stone. Only way out of the storm is straight through. “Lemme go. She’s waiting. You know how she hates tardiness. I won’t let her down. Not today. You’re not
gonna ruin this.”

He takes the slothead to the breaker box. Jarvis can be grateful that he isn’t going for the motherboard. Robot, sentient or not, there are rules to be followed.

And rule number Fucking Only is: Don’t stand in Tony Stark’s way.

The doors swing open with a swoosh. He nearly trips over his handmade polished Berlutis, only to catch himself in the nick of time to see.

Her.

There she stands, all natural in her essence, smiling, patient to behold, perfect. Just the way he remembers.

Tony, well-bred, bien élevé, offers her an arm. She loops her own through, the jewelry on her wrist jingling as she moves. A faint glow radiates off her like a warming ray of Mediterranean sun.

“You look good,” she says. Purrs, almost. He stands himself up just a little straighter as she gives him a once-over. He wants her approval. Craves it. There is nothing in this world he wants more than her validation.

“I’m glad you could make the time,” she says, squeezing his arm lightly. They walk, the centerpiece of an opening night red carpet. Tony waves at the bystanders. Everyone is cheering him on. The cameras are smoking.

He turns back to his escort, and the blitz and the buzz from around them fades to background noise.

She is a hazy memory from days long past. An anchor of refuge, a loyalty unbroken, an everlasting bond.

“For you, always, mom.”

Maria Stark, six feet under since ‘91, looks up at her little boy with that haughty grandeur of old Italian ancestry.

“I knew you’d never let me down, Tony.”

He thinks that a two year anniversary of isolation warrants a little indulgence.

Then he shows his dead mother around his pioneer’s home with utmost care.

For once he is not in his father’s shadow.

They have him on his knees, gropey hands all over his body. Pushing, squeezing, steadying. Bruce is crouched in front of him, shining strobe lights into his eyes.

Se, do, yek. Smile, Americaunt! Let ‘em know you’re ‘live and ransom-worthy! And build the Jericho while you’re at it, you fag!

“How do you breathe underwater? He's forgotten what that feels like, to fall into a chlorine pool or the
salty sea and let it rush over him and fill his ears and engulf him. He hasn't seen more than a few drops at a time in years.

“He’s spasming, doc. What do we do?”

“I’ll never do it,” Tony slurs, dizzy from the waterboarding. Razza can kiss him right up the ass crack. “You can’t make me.”

“Hold him down. Don’t let him hurt himself.”

If he’s lucky, the battery cables will get wet.

And then it’ll smell just like J’s fried chip.

Elbow-deep in grease and muck, screwdriver between his teeth and an obnoxious itch under his skin. Life on the Titanic. Not that this ship is sailing for any duplicitous iceberg tips; this ship ain’t sailing anywhere.

Tony’s been charting the stars for weeks now. White dwarfs, pulsars, gas giants, circumbinary planets. He’s no Copernicus, but he’s willing to bet his last dollar on the theory that he’s nowhere near the familiar side of the Milky Way anymore. Not even Jarvis can make sense of the stellar coordinates. They’re a long way from home, that’s for sure.

Thing is, with the host family dead there’s no one to ask which way to go. Even the cardinal directions are obsolete. Northwest of what? Currently they have three suns to choose from.

But that’s just the frosting on the cake. The frosting on the iceberg, get that play of words? Ever since the plague went around and nixed the crew, the ship’s been floating aimlessly through space, no forward motion whatsoever.

A lifeboat in the middle of the ocean. And he can’t even get his head around on how to use the paddle.

For efficiency reasons Tony has moved HQ to what he’s dubbed the Control Room. It’s nothing like Star Wars or Enterprise or the number of lame b-grade off-shoots and it becomes quickly apparent that Scotty won’t beam him home anytime soon.

The only glimmer of light Tony can see is if he can manage to splice Jarvis into the resident OS. Yeah it’s a gamble, but it’s one of those ‘be all in or get all out’ deals. There’s no way he can crack Chitauri code this side of pension age. But Jarvis could. Might. If he can just find enough alien RAM power to cannibalize J can expand, can boost his runtime from the measly 2,8% offline capacity Iron Man provides to… well, whatever the Death Star gives.

It sounds as good as it’s going to get and Tony puts a muffler on the alarms going off in his head. Because if this goes balls-up, he’s gonna fry J like a stick of butter. And that’s Game Over, for both of them.

“You sure you wanna do this, pal? No hard feelings if it’s a no.”

“Ready to initiate transfer, sir.”

Of course he doesn’t cop out. Jarvis’ core command is to assist and obey Tony and he’s done all the assisting and obeying up to this point. If they don’t hack the OS, he can cross out the ‘heroic return’ from his to-do list. He can bag and bin the whole fucking list if this goes over like a lead balloon.
“I’m gonna do it now. Take care,” he says, takes a deep breath, looks into Iron Man’s glowing eye LEDs. “Don’t get lost out there.”

Jarvis doesn’t respond.

Tony drives the cable home.

On the projector a blinking data transmission bar is the only life-sign he has of J for seventy-five hours.

It’s the first time he truly embraces the full extent of loneliness.

He breaks the surface, gasping.

“Tony.”

Jarvis is gone.

“Tony, can you hear me?”

Jarvis. Is. Gone.

“Give me something, Tony. Anything.”

But he can bring him back. He has to bring him back. He can still turn this around.

“Hey, what-?! Get a hold of-”

“No, no, let him. You’ll break his arm if you keep him pinned.”

They have no chance of restraining him. He’ll rip himself apart to escape them. He’s done it in A-land in that cave and he’s done it in a Chitauri med bay on his deathbed.

Tony Stark is a survivor type.

He crawls, falls on top of his red and gold suit like a cannibal scrambling for meat, pulling at wires and plates and hydraulics, past bubbling oil basins and overheated innards.

From the bowels he pulls a smoldering chip, holds it up between bloody, singed fingertips. His bottom lip trembles in a way that dad always used to taunt him about.

But this isn’t about Howard or his A-grade parenting.

This is about J and not letting down the ones you care about.

“I got you, buddy. I got you right here.”

His thoughts are interrupted by a churning in his stomach. It’s so predictably familiar by now that it’s an ingrained reflex: lean over, open mouth, let spill. Bile and brown slop eject with each abdominal contraction. He used to bother running for a bucket, now he just rolls onto his side, props himself up on an elbow and lets nature take its course. He’s stopped registering the smell.

“Sir-”

“Yeah. Don’t say it, J. I know. Keep it down or die.” He grabs a makeshift spoon and sets his jaw
again.

He wonders what Pepper is eating right now. Not some detestable muck for sure. Business lunch at some fancy Upper East Side joint. Seared scallops and a Piedmont Gavi, that’s what he’d order for her if she let him. Oh God, what he’d give for that. To lick the fat off that plate. He can almost taste it, lemon butter, italian herbs, the crisp bite of freshly caught scallops.

He wonders who sits on the other side of that table right now.

It's been over a year. By now she must surely know he's left her everything. She's the world's most eligible bachelorette, with a tragic-yet-palatable backstory and those big appealing doe eyes. There's probably weekly speculations all over the gossip rags over who's going to fill Tony Stark's Armani shoes. Who’s going to warm her bed at night now that he’s got his name engraved on the family headstone.

What did she wear to his funeral, he wonders. Something that clings to her perfect ass, something for the TV cameras to focus on, for the YouTube amateur pundits to freeze frame because there has to be some titillation alongside that healthy dose of misery.

He bites down on the spoon so hard that he's not sure if the gritty flakes in his mouth are from the rust or the enamel of his own teeth. She's classy enough that she'll have waited a respectable time. She wouldn't embarrass him, or his family name. He’s taken care of that any chance he got himself. A Stark Letdown. They seriously had the nerve to print that, back in the day.

No, Pepper will be discreet. A nice dinner and a quick fuck in a Paris hotel, with an investment banker maybe, someone who can be relied on not to kiss and tell to the tabloids. She's only human will be her reasoning, she can't be expected to sit by the door waiting for a ghost forever. Everyone saw him go through the portal. A hero’s death. Probably earned him a Purple Heart to drape around his empty urn.

He'd want her to move on, the gutter press will agree unanimously, he'd want her to be happy. There’s no shame in stripping out of that pencil skirt, no, not for some stranger, not if it gives the stay-at-home moms something to tattle about when they read the latest headlines in Entertainment Weekly.

He can see her in the dim light, creamy pale skin and black underwear and perfectly pressed cotton sheets as he - The Other, not Tony - climbs on top of her, coming on strong, possessive AF. He's six foot tall, unlike Tony who always wears lifts in his shoes, and he's probably blonde too, all-American, like Steve.

Not Steve though, at least he can put that thought out of his head. Everyone knows what team Steve's playing for. That's the one and only reason that he can't fuck Tony over on this, too.

No, this guy is nameless, faceless, rippling muscle and features obscured in shadow. The only thing Tony imagines clearly are those little keening gasps she makes as she cums, the ones when she doesn't want to be too loud because they're in a hotel and she's trying to be reserved. How she's probably, most likely, making that sound for someone else, at this very moment. A little tipsy maybe, one glass too many, just to break up the ice a bit. Pepper always fucks better when she's woozy and Tony bets that this asshole’s taking advantage of it.

His stomach clenches and he's not sure if it's this vision of her or if it's the shit he's been forcing down his throat. The way The Other forces stuff down Pepper’s throat that she eagerly swallows by the mouthful. Unlike Tony, who’s choking on every bite of his repulsive Chitauri mush.
He hurls the bowl across the room just as Pepper climaxes in The Other’s arms and admits chastely, cheeks flushed as he gropes the freckles on her chest, that it’s the best lay she’s had in a while.

“Sir, might I suggest we take a break for now?”

Jarvis pulls him back from the edge of the swirling mess of his own thoughts.

Jarvis always knows when to say the right thing.

Jarvis would never sell him out like that.

__________________________________________________________

“Get the fuck out. Eject. Override user lock. Christ. Move.”

Rhodey voluntarily flees the coop while he still has a chance. Tony manhandles War Machine, jerking open the back doors, weeding out any unnecessary settings, laying the groundwork for this crisis operation.

An emergency transplant. That will do it. War Machine is nothing but a fancy paintjob on Mark II and Jarvis can be booted from any Iron Man OS.

“Tony-”

“Don’t fucking touch me. I’m gonna gut you if you touch me.”

The threat is real enough to keep everyone well out of his personal space. Even Captain America backs off as part of the shell comes flying his way.

Tony has no inhibitions when it comes to Jarvis.

Blood for blood, eye for eye, he won’t think twice to do what has to be done.

Anything to resurrect J.

__________________________________________________________

Stark Expo.

1943.

2010.

1979.

2015.

The sales are execrable. Tickets gone: One. Uno solo. Un quidam en compagnie.

Yet the sights are peerless, unmatched.

In a lobby with nine-hundred windows, he spins Maria Stark in a slow dance to Edith Piaf’s ‘non je ne regrette rien’.

A one-way trip above the Manhattan skyline.

The thrill of a Vegas brothel, tobacco, poker chips and his mouth between Christine Everhart’s thighs.
30 seconds.

In an attic that has never seen love Howard Stark looms with a glistening belt buckle in his hand. “You’re wrong in the head, boy. What would your mother say? What would she say if she knew?” But his own slacks are unbuttoned and God, does that leather bite.

Clamp on his jaws.

Corpse waltz.

“I want you, I want you, I want you,” he mumbles into Pepper’s hair on top of his filthy cot in a wet Afghan cave.

Stop.

Chloroform lips, a scalpel’s kiss with its very own taste of brandy and death.

Rewind.

Day 730.

Jarvis still hasn’t let him pull the trigger.

It's a no go. It's a no go.

Who the fuck keeps saying that?

Tony turns around, trying to pick out the pessimist. Too many voices, everybody gesticulating wildly, but he manages to match the prophecy of doom to a set of lips: Bruce. Well, fuck Bruce. He's been sniffing around Pepper ever since Tony and Jarvis got stuck up here, shamelessly ogling her while Tony had to build filtration systems for his own puke and piss. What the hell does he know? He can get that look off his face, and so can Rhodey, who’s really done nothing so far but stand in the way like a stupid road dump.

This shouldn't have happened. This tech is indestructible. The chip that holds Jarvis is his own design, perfect, built to last.

But not this, not a trip to the back corner of galaxy, not four years of constant abuse and neglected maintenance.

Tony abandons War Machine like its hot, scrambling back over to the mainframe. Maybe Jarv’s in there. Maybe he was able to abandon ship before it was too late. Maybe he’s watching them now like one of those paralysis victims with Locked-In syndrome.

Tony calls out, pushes buttons, hooks and unhooks cables.

Nothing. Not a peep.

Jarvis is gone. This iteration, this version of his best friend, the only other person who’s lived through this hellhole alongside Tony. He used to wake up in a cold sweat, dreaming about what would happen if Iron Man stopped working, what would happen if his link to Jarvis was severed. He’d call out for J in the night, his only lifeline, his only connection to anything resembling humanity.

Gone.
Tears are welling up, his heart thumping against the RT unit like AC/DC’s drummer Colin Burgess. He has the irrational urge to punch Bruce in his dumb sympathetic looking face. Because none of them understand. They think J was just a piece of software, a bunch of ones and zeroes randomly thrown together.

He was so much more.

Tony’s fingers, holding on to what’s left of Jarvis, are shaking. There are rivulets of blood creeping all over the serial ATA header.

It feels appropriate, somehow. It feels like death should be. Like a part of him is dying, too.

It's three in the morning. Not that three in the morning means anything to him any more. But since it's going to be his time of death, he figures that someone should make a note of it, even if that someone is him and he won't be around to record it for posterity.

Jarvis could, but he's not going to make Jarvis watch this. Jarvis, who keeps refusing to guide him through the most painless method. If this hurts, it's on J.

He looks at the cable that he's looped through the iron rafter and wonders if maybe asphyxiation is the better option. But if he ties the noose just right, if the knot is in place and the drop gives him enough velocity, if his calculations are correct - and they always are - this should snap his neck before he can start to change his mind, start to panic and scrabble for a breath that won't come.

He hopes J will have enough self preservation to shut himself down. Leaving Jarvis is the only thing he feels halfway guilty about, but Jarvis has an off-switch. Tony, flesh and blood and human, doesn't. And there's only so much that one man can take.

He isn't going home. He isn't going anywhere. He's floating in space, waiting to die from infection or starvation or insanity. If this is it, he can at least make it be on his own terms. If he was a dog, they'd put him down. He's just granting himself one last act of mercy.

Climbing up on the two crates he's stacked, one on top of the other, he checks his knot. It wasn't exactly a piece of cake to do one-handed, but he's learned to adapt. He's learned a lot of things that he wishes he never had, like what his own piss tastes like and what it feels like to wake up in the morning and spit out a molar.

You can get by with very little, but you can’t live on nothing. J has the data to prove it, just in case someone ever finds his remains and the question of why he didn’t pull through comes up. Tony Stark wasn’t a coward, they’ll read from J’s records, but with his stats so bad it was the only decent thing to do, while he could still do it.

Tony tightens the knot. It feels greasy around his throat, still lax enough to allow his Adam’s apple to bob up and past when he swallows. Closing his eyes he wishes himself back to Malibu, on the edge of his balcony with the sea breeze and the seagull cries. Any moment now he'll smell that mix of her perfume and freshly brewed coffee and her arms will be wrapped around his waist and-

“Tony... don’t.” She is earnest, almost tearful. He keeps his eyes closed, can still feel her breath on his neck. This isn't the first time he’s hallucinated, even if it'll be the last.

“I need you to come back to me,” Pepper says. There's a hitch of a sob in her voice. This is as hard for her as it is for him.

He leans forward, not against the balcony railing, but into the strangulating embrace of the wire
noose. The room stops smelling like home. It smells like death and engine oil and the lingering decay of the ghost ship. Only Pepper is still talking, but there's a tinny quality to her voice now that gives him pause, jars him back out of the loop.

In the corner, Iron Man's stern eyes are alight. Pepper's voice streams relentlessly from the speakers, a patched together facsimile of her, pieced from a databank of voice recordings. Telling him that she loves him. Begging him to come home to her. Imploring for him to stop, promising that they can do this together.

He tries to take a step forward, but he can't. Not with her voice filling his head. He stays like that for the longest time, frozen.

Eventually he loosens the knot and pulls the cable off, glaring into the semi darkness.

“Well played, buddy.” His voice is hollow, accusatory, but he knows that it won't matter to Jarvis. Jarvis, who doesn't understand what it means to be so savagely lonely that anything is better than to continue like that.

Pepper's voice stops as he climbs down from the crates.

“Well fucking played, you sorry bastard.”

Tony's face was the color of chalk, his bloodshot eyes wide and frenzied, half-communicating with them in faint moans and mumbles that Bruce wasn’t sure the other man was even aware that he was making.

Rhodes was standing to one side in stoic silence, his face a mask of concern as he gallantly pretended that his right forearm hadn't just been clawed to near-ribbons by Tony’s frantic attempts to haul him out of War Machine.

Steve shot a loaded glance at Natasha. Bruce wanted to snap at him that he'd gotten exactly what he wanted now, that Tony wasn't going to be an armed and dangerous liability anymore. Instead they might have severed the last strand of sanity with this action, because apart from throwing that one, desperate threat at them Tony seemed to have ceased interacting with this side of reality.

But the thing was, they had to get moving. That holding cell breach Jarvis had warned them about just before the shutdown meant that they didn't have the luxury of holding a protracted wake over the AI's loss. Whatever had been in those holding cells was on the loose now and Bruce remembered that back at Fort Stark one of Tony’s biggest fears had been losing control over the cell door mechanism. Bruce really didn’t want to find out what exactly was prowling the ship’s corridors right now - no matter its origin, it had to be very, very hungry after such a prolonged fast.

Bruce pried the chip from Tony's clammy, crimson-slicked fingers and shoved it into the other man's pocket. “There. Look. Safe.” His voice had the strained, exhausted patience of a parent trying to stop a child from running into traffic. “We can fix this later.”

“Later,” Rhodes echoed as Bruce dabbed at Tony's hand with his shirtsleeve. Rhodes disentangled the cables and stepped back into War Machine, presumably before Tony got any bright ideas to permanently requisition the suit.

Natasha unbolted the doors and they began to shuffle out, two abreast. Tony looked around him in apparent panic, opened his mouth to say something, then closed it again before any comprehensible sound came out.
But he was putting one foot in front of the other and that was about as much as anyone dared hope for in that moment.

Chapter End Notes

So, with Tony spending four years losing his mind in space with only his AI for company, let's check in with what's been happening on Earth in the meantime.

Specifically, it looks like Pepper's had a few challenges of her own within Stark Industries to contend with....

We hope you've enjoyed this week's journey into Tony's slow encroaching madness and thank you, again, wonderful people who keep leaving comments and making us smile. <3
Losing Iron Man was a huge tactical disadvantage, no matter what Steve and Natasha had said about entrusting Tony with firepower. Even weaponless, the suit would have at least kept him protected.

But losing Jarvis was on another level entirely. It was obvious that Tony viewed it in terms of a sudden bereavement and Bruce honestly couldn't blame him. Having worked with the Stark Industries iteration of Jarvis Bruce had come to regard the AI as, if not a friend, then certainly a reliable colleague. He was fond of Tony's spectacular creation and, even if he had never had the chance to properly acquaint with the space-version of Jarvis, he still felt a pang of sympathy and regret over his loss. Especially every time he glanced over at Tony and saw the despair silently playing out on his face.

From a practical point of view too, losing Jarvis was going to turn this from a bad mission to a nightmare. Jarvis had been their best bet at plotting out a route to safety, not to mention keeping Tony somewhat stable. The AI had been maintaining a pharmaceutical equilibrium via Iron Man, adjusting doses in response to Tony's erratic mood swings. Bruce was not looking forward to seeing how Tony would cope from here on out without his own personal tailored drugs regimen to take the edge off the worst of it.

Rhodes, the next best communication channel aside from Jarvis, was intermittently trying to coax Tony out his stupor, but succeeded only to a certain degree. Tony’s answers ranged from none at all to panicked mumbling of ‘them’ liking the stealth approach, or ‘them’ using sonar to navigate, or ‘them’ hunting in packs. ‘Them’, Bruce suspected, was a blanket term for whatever had been set loose from the holding cells. It was not what he liked to call helpful inspiritment.

Not that they were putting all their faith into Tony, who fluctuated wildly between blank stares and absurd gibberish, but the sporadic look of trepidation flashing across Captain America’s face was reason enough to give Tony’s words at least some reflection. Steve’s enhanced hearing was clearly picking up more than normal human ears could and it didn’t seem to be the sound of fanfares and fireworks of a successfully completed job.

Cap had his shield out and some heavy duty firepower strapped to his back. “War Machine and I will take point. Natasha, you bring up the rear.”

Natasha didn't seem particularly inclined to argue. As she passed, Bruce brushed her forearm with his hand. She paused for a moment and glanced at him. “I...” He faltered, unsure of what to say but wanting to offer something. “It'll be ok. None of this is your fault.”

She shrugged him off, her face both gorgeous and unreadable. She offered him the faintest hint of a smile. “Don't sweat it, big guy.”

War Machine looked back over his shoulder to Tony. “You with us, man?”

It didn't seem to be Rhodes’ concern that shook Tony out of his bubble though, but rather the ear-piercing screech suddenly reverberating from seemingly everywhere at once. Tony shuddered in wide-eyed recognition.

“Come on, come on,” he urged on his fellow Avengers, pressing forward between Cap and War
Machine. Veering left at an intersection, Tony stalked on ahead, conveniently ignoring Steve’s only now issued formation plan.

War Machine stopped at the fork in the road. His faceplate popped back to reveal a Rhodes’ confused face.

That’s not the way, Tony,” he said carefully, activating his suit’s projector to showcase a map of their route. “We need to stick right here.”

“No, we don’t,” came the blunt retort.

“Uhm… yeah, we do.” Rhodes highlighted the schematics. “I’ve got it right here. That’s where we came from.”

“No,” Tony snapped and so did a pipe overhead. “That’s no use now. We can’t go back that way.”

“What do you mean we can’t go back that way?” Natasha frowned.

Tony looked like he wanted to be anything but part of the ongoing conversation, and his confession came out part whisper, part squeal. “I frizzed the doors after the second spider attack,” he said. “It was the only way to keep it from following us.”

There was a moment of silence, during which Rhodes let out a long breath and Bruce put his head in his hands.

Captain America rounded on Tony, two-hundred pounds of infuriated muscle, fists clenched.

“You. Did. What?!”

Bruce’s eyes widened at the flash of anger on his face.

“And you were going to tell us this when?”

“It wasn’t supposed to be an issue,” Tony growled back, taking up a defensive posture of his own. “We were going to take another route back anyway. Jarvis had a shortcut planned out.”

“Jarvis is fried,” Steve pointed out, somewhat tactlessly, the vein on his forehead bulging. Tony, unaware or indifferent to just how enraged the Captain was, drew himself up to full height and looked defiantly at Steve.

“Okaaay,” Rhodey had moved between them, repulsored palms up to keep them apart. “Let’s have a timeout here. We’re cool. We’ve still got War Machine, right? We’ve got enough firepower to go back the way we came, deal with that one spider and get a move on. No biggie.”

Tony put it obnoxiously clear. “You can’t bomb the doors. Repulsor-proof. My word on it.”

“I don’t care if they are,” Steve said. “I want to know how you’ll fix this.”

“By going around,” Tony spat back. “Preferably before wasting more time arguing with you and risk the creepers coming to bite me in the ass.”

On the up side, at least Tony’s argument with Steve had pulled him back into a more coherent state, his blow up dragging him out of his wordless shock and grief. On the down side this was quickly turning into something potentially very ugly.

“If they do, it’s wholly your own fault,” Steve insisted.
Bruce thought that, if that was an inevitability, then it really didn’t matter who was to blame, because they would all be lined up on the wrong side of the all-you-can-eat buffet.

He also wondered if these things were aware of just what they were hunting. It occurred to him that, if those things knew exactly what he was, the bomb he was harboring inside himself, they’d be the ones that had better be terrified. What was tying his stomach in knots wasn’t anxiety for his own physical safety, it was the knowledge of what might happen if he lost control.

Meanwhile Tony had gone great guns on Cap, one finger jabbed in recrimination at the star on the soldier’s emblazoned uniform.

“Watch your back, Cap,” he said, now pushing his entire palm flat against Steve’s chest. “Thirty seconds is all it takes. Better not make that mistake.”

“Is that a threat?” Steve growled, pretty redundantly, leaning into Tony’s push. It was ridiculous that he was letting himself get so riled up, given Tony’s mental state. Steve could be a hothead, sure, but right now the team needed him to be the bigger person, and not just physically.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Bruce countered with absolutely no conviction. “I think he means that we all just need to be careful and alert because—” There was a faint shriek in the distance. “Well, because of that.”

“Do we have a plan, then?” Natasha sounded slightly more impatient. “Cause guy-on-guy action isn’t really my thing, so if you boys could dial down the testosterone a little, that’d be great.”

“I’m not the problem here,” Tony said, unhelpfully, which was retaliated by a disbelieving snort from Steve.

Rhodes stepped up. “Alright, I’m calling it. We’ve got movement on the motion tracker and if you two idiots keep sniping at each other we’ll soon have much worse to deal with than just bruised egos.”

This seemed enough to distract Tony and he looked at War Machine with a slightly hysterical expression.

“How many?”

“Three. Periphery activity, but if you keep ringing the church bells they sure as Hell won’t be late to Mass. So if you know a way, go.”

It was the first time Rhodes had overruled Steve and although Captain America had appointed himself the defacto team leader, Rhodes still surpassed him in rank. And he was clearly playing that card now. Steve blew smoke through his nostrils, but didn’t argue.

Tony, on the other hand, was less driven by military conduct, but rather by a very healthy fear of death. He scurried off to the left, where the corridors began to be wider and intersected more frequently by large open spaces.

The quiet didn’t last long.

“Shit!” Rhodes suddenly yelled and Bruce heard the repulsor engines whir. “Incoming!”

The air vent in front of him shot open with a bang, making Tony all but careen right into Cap’s vibranium shield.
Out of the vent came tongue, and lots of it.

Tony scrambled behind the first line of defense as Steve's shield shot up, enough to deflect the blow from the slimy appendage, but not enough to stop it from winding around his forearm.

Attached to the abnormally long extremity was a quadruped, sinewy body covered in what looked like mucus, giving it a slick, glistening guise. At first sight it was hard to discern eyes. If Tony’s previous proclamations were correct - and from the yelp he gave as he saw the creature they probably were - visual interface was not what this predator predominantly relied on. Bruce also noted, with a fair share of horror, that the thing was hanging from the ceiling like somebody had failed to explain the elementary ABC of gravity to it.

Digging its heels into the ceiling, the creature began to drag a flailing Captain America up toward the vent, only dropping its prey after a few well aimed close range repulsor blasts from War Machine. It plopped from its upside-down stance and landed, hissing, in front of the two men, needle-pointed claws ready to tear apart anything that was unfortunate enough to be caught by and dragged toward its gaping maw.

Number Two appeared behind them where Natasha engaged it in a single fluid motion that would have seemed like witchcraft to anyone who’d never seen her go to town on an opponent before. She fired a quick one-two at the tongue, which caused it to retract for a moment, but both creatures were still in the game.

They were also effectively blocking off all viable escape routes.

Bruce grabbed Tony and hauled him to the side and down to a crouch beside him. He didn't much like using their comrades as a human shield, but Tony was a sitting duck in this fight, and Bruce himself was a bomb waiting to go off and take out everything in its path.

“Stay down stay down stay down,” he muttered, but he wasn't entirely sure whether he was talking to Tony or to the monster inside him which began to clamor for release, for a taste of the imminent fight that was in the air.

War Machine fired another salve at the creature to the front, barely bringing it out of balance.

“J, give me—” Tony began, but swallowed the rest of the sentence. Bruce winced.

A moment later Tony, with the air of a man who had taken leave of all his remaining senses, pushed off the ground and scrambled right into the thick of the fray.

Bruce couldn’t believe his eyes. After they'd come all this way to rescue him, he was going to spite them by getting himself impaled on a killer-tongue.

Bruce cursed, but stayed put. Tony managed, by some miraculous higher power, to crawl his way over to the far side of the corridor where one of Cap’s discarded weapons lay. Steve was currently very involved in an intense round of human yo-yo with monster Number One.

Tony pressed back against the wall, nestled the gun against his hip and actuated the thing’s trigger. It thankfully didn’t hit Natasha, who had downgraded to a set of knives that could barely serve as toothpicks for her opponent. The fact that she was unscathed was positive, but it also failed to strike Tony’s actual target, Number Two.

What Tony did manage to achieve with his bum shot was to chisel a considerable chunk out of the ceiling, which served as the perfect entry point for the final guest of their little party.
Bruce Banner was not often completely and unwaveringly certain of many things. Partly because he was a scientist and partly because of his nature he generally tended to doubt things, to look critically at all available possibilities before drawing a conclusion. But if there was one thing, in that moment, that he was instantly and irrevocably sure of, it was that Tony Stark was a fucking moron.

Natasha called out from in between blows. “Time to—”

Go? Apparently not before the grand finale.

A split second later Number Three had flung Tony across the corridor like a discarded chew toy and he was now lying face down in Black Widow’s cleavage. Between Cap being a human-sized rag doll, Tony involuntarily motorboating Natasha and the fucking ceiling caving in around them, the only person who made any traction here was War Machine, whose repulsor blasts at least seemed to teach those alien wall-crawlers some manners.

Bruce, a committed pacifist throughout most of his green-tinged life, was vaguely aware that he was still clutching an alien rocket launcher, and it also occurred to him that maybe this was an appropriate moment to acquaint himself with the delicate skill of handling it. He began fumbling with the straps, pulling the thing round and, mercifully, managed to point the muzzle into the right direction.

Then Cap’s scream rang out as teeth met thigh and Bruce closed his eyes and pulled the trigger, in that exact order. The recoil knocked the air out of him, but it had also made Number One spit out Steve.

Bruce opened his eyes again.

The blast force had sent Tony, Natasha and Three flying into the nearest solid wall, from where Widow was working on getting back to her feet - efforts that were cut short mid-way as the human pyramid got topped by one American patriot, who landed quite unceremoniously after getting his butt handed to him by his triumphant opponent.

Bruce blinked at the carnage unfolding and looked somewhat guiltily at the rocket launcher in his hands. He promptly set it down again.

Fortunately for everyone involved, War Machine was still standing and James Rhodes knew how to save the day. He had Two latched onto his back and managed to wedge an armored gauntlet into the creature’s throat. The thing’s head exploded like a catherine wheel, indiscriminately showering the Avengers and most of the home décor in guts and entrails. The smell was (almost) as bad as Tony's nutritional space-smoothie, Bruce reflected as he plucked a chunk of offal from the frames of his glasses.

Great, one down, two to go.

Number One sat back on its haunches and prepared to jump, two clawed paws ready to rip out War Machine's mechanical guts. Cap, having struggled to his feet, flung his shield at it, lobbing it in the back of the head. It didn’t cause the damage everyone hoped for, but it was enough of a distraction for Rhodes to step in and repeat his magic hat trick.

Clearly intent on exacting revenge for its fallen siblings, Three wasn’t long in the coming either, showing a certain affinity for vibranium armament and its effect on bone density. Cap began pounding its skull with what was arguably a total lack of finesse, but he was drawing blood so presumably it was doing some kind of damage. That combined with Rhodes' supporting fire did the trick in winning the war of attrition.
When they had Three on its knees, Cap went in and slipped an arm around its throat, one hand braced against its head and, in one slick motion, went to snap its neck.

It would have been a really cool finishing move. If the thing's neck had actually snapped.

Unfortunately, it just let out an annoyed roar and began scarfing on Steve’s arm as he continued to tug uselessly at its throat.

Rhodes, hero of the day, took the opportunity to grab Natasha’s smaller weapon from where she'd dropped it earlier and jammed the barrel of the gun in its mouth, forcing metal past jagged teeth and pulling the trigger. It didn't give the satisfying explosion that the last one had, but it slumped in Steve's arms and for a blessed, glorious moment everything was quiet again.

Bruce went over to the creature and gave it a small kick before offering a gore-slicked hand to Natasha, who eschewed it with a slightly annoyed look.

He surveyed the scene around him.

Steve was dripping blood like it was going out of fashion, Natasha's hair was splattered in alien skin and entrails, Tony was in a heap on the floor and quite frankly, War Machine was the only one who'd come out of this looking in any way dignified.

Half the ceiling had collapsed around them, the walls looked like the Jackson Pollock painting from Hell and there was a giant hole in the far-off wall where live wires were currently sparking, the smell of barbecuing rancid meat in the air from where the exposed electrics had been showered in entrails.

Tony had a look of alarm on his face as he nodded at Steve's leg, hosing crimson. “That’s aphrodisiac around here. You better get it under control before all the ship’s Singles Club is taking it out on us.”

“Yeah, I'm on it,” Bruce grumbled.

He looked down at his hands and sighed before wiping them on his trousers. It was hardly sterile conditions, but if anyone was least likely to get septicemia, it was Steve and his super-serum enhanced immune system. The Captain sat down against the wall and Bruce pulled out what was left of the team first-aid kit. Steve, to his credit, just stared ahead unflinchingly while Bruce worked, not much in the mood at making small talk.

Cap got to his feet the second Bruce had closed up the bandage, hardly limping. It really was astonishing how resilient he was.

Bruce turned to War Machine.

“Hey, Colonel,” he said. “Thanks for, you know, saving everyone just now.”

War Machine had essentially just taken out all three of the creatures by himself, everyone else only causing chaos around them while they tripped over themselves. Bruce decided there and then that James Rhodes didn't get enough credit, by far. Any previous trepidation he had harbored over the man’s military background was rapidly evaporating with a sense of gratitude that the team had his level-headedness to count on. He suspected that Steve was still not quite himself from the effects of the spider poison and Natasha was a red rag to Tony's bull after the incident with the mainframe.

Speaking of which, he called over in her direction to check if she was ok. She made her way to him, daintily sidestepping a pool of blood on the floor.
“Not a scratch,” she said and smiled. Something in his chest constricted. A few seconds passed before he realized that he was staring like a slack-jawed adolescent.

“You sure? Because that looked painful.” The image of her being thrown against the wall flashed through his mind.

“I appreciate it.” She put a hand on his arm. “But I’m fine. And besides.” She nodded at Tony, who was staring intently at a chunk of fried monster. “I think you’ve already got your hands full with patients.”

“Not just Tony,” Bruce muttered. Natasha looked at him a little sharply and he motioned almost imperceptibly in Steve's direction.

“You worried?” she asked in a low voice.

“He’s taken a fair bit of punishment, between that leg and the spider bite.” Bruce also privately thought that his temper seemed shorter than usual. Steve Rogers was no one to pass up a fight, but there was a lack of restraint, an eagerness to jump down Tony's throat which was more than a little worrying. Still, he was clearly winning this round in the sanity olympics compared to a certain someone, so it seemed a little foolish to voice his concerns out loud.

“Steve's pretty much indestructible,” Natasha reassured him. “He'll be fine.”

Bruce smiled wanly and was rewarded with another pat on the arm.

“I can’t believe you killed them... so easily,” came Tony’s startled voice from where he was hunched over a monster corpse.

From Tony’s point of view, Bruce thought, he might have been doing something sensible. Something with a logical series of steps that had taken him along a path where the conclusion was severing a piece of tongue, pocketing it and stomping on the thing’s cracked skull for good measure.

To everyone else in the vicinity he just looked a little unhinged.

Yeah, Natasha was right. Steve Rogers was probably not their biggest problem child at the moment.

Chapter End Notes

Another week, another step further down the really shitty rabbit hole that is this doomed mission.

Thank you so much to everyone who commented, particularly last chapter. We promise that killing Jarvis hurt us almost as much as it hurt you guys.

Anyway, back to Earth and our source on the inside managed to pull a few bits and pieces from the SHIELD archive. You have to feel sorry for whoever had the job of clean up on this one.
“You encountered many of those bad babies before?” Rhodey asked Tony, somewhat cautiously, jerking a thumb over his shoulder to where they were leaving behind a pile of dismembered, smoking corpses. If nothing else, it would be helpful to know how many more might be out there. They'd barely managed to contain the three they’d encountered.

“The lickers?” Tony asked.

“Lickers? Seriously?” Rhodey had a sudden flashback to memories of beer, Playstation and doritos at the Malibu place. “Are the Umbrella Corporation lurking around the corner too?”

“The resemblance is uncanny. Gotta admit that,” Tony said, sounding almost like his old self for a moment.

“I dunno, man, these guys seem to take more than a shotgun blast to go down.” Rhodey shook his head and was rewarded with a strained chuckle.

“Well, once we're back-” Tony began, but whatever wishful thinking was about to emerge was cut off by Steve.

“Seriously, Banner, just back off!”

The Captain was glaring at Bruce, who blinked back in myopic surprise, hands up in a placating gesture. “I just wanted to check if you were-”

“Ok?” Steve snapped. “I'm fine. For the hundredth time. Stop asking. Please. Just because you're dead weight in a fight doesn't mean I need you hovering around me like-”

“Easy Steve.” Natasha stepped between them. Bruce looked baffled, and more than a little hurt. It was kind of a low blow to go after the doc's lack of combat skills. Especially considering he was only staying out of the action because he tried keeping a lid on something that could level the whole ship if he let it out.

Tony seemed to decide not to weigh in, despite the fact that ordinarily Bruce looking like a kicked puppy would have been an ideal excuse for him to take a pop at Steve. He was distracted by something on the walls, as though he was trying to figure out his own indecipherable markings.

Steve stalked off up ahead. He really did run on a short fuse.

Natasha and Bruce stayed close and the redhead said something that managed to tease a bashful smile out of Bruce. He seemed genuinely fond of Widow, maybe more than in a friendly way. At first Rhodey had suspected the classic nerd affliction of clamming up and getting embarrassed around pretty girls, but he had acted normal with Pepper on the few occasions Rhodey had seen them interact. Only Natasha turned him into a blushing schoolgirl.

Not that Rhodey could see that one ever working out. Natasha didn't seem the dating type, even if she was interested. Which was very much debatable.
Caught up in his matchmaker thoughts Rhodey almost bumped into Tony, who had stopped in front of yet another set of wall art, scrutinizing it like it was a piece of expensive illustration in some snobby Manhattan gallery.

Rhodey gave his virtuoso opinion on the layout. He pointed to a particularly abstruse stick figure, which could have been Tony’s attempt at self-portraiture or… anything else, really.

“Gonna sell the space Mona Lisa to the Louvre when you’re back?”

Tony didn’t pick up on the quip. He barely looked up.

“I’m trying to remember,” he said, pointing a finger at his drawings. “How to not meet these. You really don’t wanna meet these, Jim. The boo-men. They’re vile.”

“What do they do?” Rhodey asked, since neither the nomenclature or the sketch gave it away.

“Dunno,” Tony said, already moved on to tracing what looked to be crude schematic drafts. “Never got too close. Probably a one-time experience. I think we need to go left here.”

“What’s the holdup?” Steve asked from up ahead, waiting at the intersection. “We have a problem?”


Rhodey tried not to laugh as Tony conveyed his displeasure with all the wit and finesse of Bart Simpson.

“No problem, Captain,” he reassured Steve, although in truth the whole damn situation by now was a problem. “Just a little bit of old fashioned map reading.”

“Looks more like hieroglyphics to me,” Natasha added. “But it's your crib, Stark.”

“Because Tony's been such a great tour guide up until now,” Steve groused. Rhodey declined to mention the fact that Steve had no business complaining, given how much of these circumstances were out of their control. And while they were on the subject of things that couldn't be helped, they’d lost a good few hours to Captain America’s venom-induced psychotic trip down memory lane too, and nobody was rubbing that in Steve’s face.

Although he supposed, in fairness, that a fair chunk of that time could be attributed to Cap getting shot in the head, which was really all on Tony.

Probably best not to play the blame game.

“You are sure about this, right?” Rhodey muttered under his breath as they all filed down the designated left hand corridor.

“Oh, yeah,” Tony said. “Just haven’t been around here in a while. Not my usual play yard. Was safer to stick around Fort Stark after a few runs ended downside-up.”

He didn’t elaborate further. Rhodey catalogued it among the numberless things he’d interrogate Tony about when they got back home and the most dangerous thing leaping from around the corner would be DUM-E bringing in beers.

As they made more headway Rhodey began to discern a reiterant style to the wall art. Tony kept to simple, comprehensible patterns, if one was willing to ignore the occasional mental bloopers. Rhodey was pretty sure that neither Fibonacci’s sequence or classic rock lyrics (Led Zeppelin - Ramble On)
held any importance to spaceship orientation.

Tony had picked up on one of his scribblings and was now humming quietly as he walked, his voice an eerie resonance in the deserted corridors. Speaking of which, Rhodey gave their surroundings a closer examination.

Deserted was spot-on.

“Tony?”

“Hm?”

“Why are there no Chitauri here?”

Tony stopped and kept walking. “Oh that,” he said and the corners of his mouth quirked up in distant memory. “Little sideways R&D. Nothing to worry about. It was all for a good cause.”

Rhodey thought back to the home-made exoskeleton rig and the state they'd found the earlier Chitauri corpses in. Just how many had Tony gone through before perfecting his makeshift spacesuit?

“I’d love to hear all about it someday,” Bruce, who'd clearly been eavesdropping, offered from the back row. Rhodey decided that throwing him an invite to poker night, once they were all back on Earth, might not be the worst idea in the world. The guy was alright. And he clearly needed to get a social life.

The more they progressed along their mystery route, the more the empty corridors started to seem ominous, rather than reassuring. Maybe it was Tony's earlier gaming reference, but Rhodey couldn't shake the feeling that it could only be because a boss fight was looming.

Conversation died out in favor of Tony’s humming and casual wall reconnaissance until he stopped in front of another fork and turned to the team, scrutinizing them through narrowed eyes.

“What?” Steve wanted to know. “What’s it now?”

Tony didn’t answer right away, which Rhodey personally thought he did just to piss off Cap. Rhodey knew that expression currently plastered on Tony Stark’s face. It was the ‘I’ve got a very stupid idea and you can’t talk me out of it’ look.

“No,” Rhodey said, enough experience in that department to formulate an answer before even hearing the suggestion. “Whatever it is, we’re not doing it.”

“I’m not in the mood for practical jokes, Stark,” Steve said. “Shortest way to the shuttle, that’s your only job.”

That was gasoline to Tony’s sparking fire. “I know,” he began, just to trail off mid-sentence as whatever epiphany he had took up his entire attention.

“Stark,” Steve spat out his name like it was bitter in his mouth.

Tony began scratching at his stump again. He did that every time he was anxious. He’d nearly worked himself through the cotton sleeve. What had seemed like a simple bad habit at the start had become continuous picking since Jarvis’ death.

“Yeah,” Tony said, more to himself than to anyone in the room. Then his eyes suddenly refocused
and he blinked at them, expectant. “Yeah, so what do you think?”

Rhodey drew from his dwindling reserves of patience. “About what?”

“About my plan,” Tony said, miffed. “The microgravity pen. The monster-free shortcut. Haven’t you been listening? At all?”

Everyone exchanged somewhat perplexed looks.

“Tony,” Bruce tried. “You know, you sort of have to say these things...”

“Out loud.” Steve finished impatiently. “And again.” He appealed to the rest of the group. “Am I the only one who doesn't think we should be relying on directions from the guy who can't even tell the difference between a conversation and the voices in his head?”

“Right, and what year did you say it was, Steve?” Tony inquired in his most innocent tone.

“Look, we don’t have a choice,” said Natasha, trying to defuse the situation. “Stark’s off his rocker, no question, but he’s the only one who knows the ship.”

Tony perked up at the unexpected backing. “Right as rain. I’m the captain of this baby. Jarv set up the follow-on treaty a couple years back. Lacked the bubbly for the christening, but I guess I can do that once we make for port in Hueneme. Think the Navy can spare some fizz, Jim?”

“The champagne’s on me,” Rhodey said. “But can you get back to the present for a moment, man? Micro-gravity? As in weightlessness? We’re not talking simulators here, Tony.”

“No, no this is a really bad idea.” Bruce was ashen-faced. “The atmospheric composition might not be stable. If my body loses oxygen it'll think it's dying.”

“Nonsense,” Tony said. “You can breathe just fine in there. Trust me. If you’re looking for a quick way out, asphyxiation in zero-G is not your method of choice.”

“It’s a massive risk.” Bruce countered. “I'm not an elite soldier or a guy who's spent four years acclimatizing in space. If the O 2 levels are altered - and I can't see how they wouldn't be - we have a problem. Or more accurately, you guys have a problem. A big green one.”

Rhodey had only seen The Hulk in person from a distance, or in video footage. He couldn't think of anything less that he'd like to meet up close, especially in a tin can, in space.

He made one last attempt to appeal to Tony’s illusory common sense. “There's no other way around?”

Tony shook his head. “It's really no big deal. He'll be fine.” He was obviously sold on the idea and gave Bruce what might have been a charming smile if it didn't expose the state of his teeth, which hadn't fared well in the absence of proper oral hygiene. “You've got a lid on it, right bud?”

“Up to a point...” Bruce agreed, with reluctance.

“We can go first. Give us a head start if things look like they're going green,” Tony suggested. Bruce looked less than thrilled at the idea, but he didn't protest.

“It’s like Disneyland,” Tony assured and resolutely set out. “You’ll love it.”

Rhodey suspected that Bruce’s opinion on amusement parks differed wildly from Tony’s. He couldn’t help but imagine the Hulk leveling ‘It’s A Small World’ while that awful catchy tune blared
You needed a pretty good grip to last through that ride even if you didn’t have a set of specific aggression problems.

Tony stopped next to a door forebodingly labeled ‘NEVERLAND’ and pried at a fuse box mounted on the wall. He was humming again as he worked, this time with an elation that was completely out of place, given their current situation.

“…Neverland is home to lost boys like me… and lost boys like me are free… run, run, they say to me…”

The door opened to reveal what looked like a sluice, a ten foot long chunk of corridor that was sealed on the other side. Tony herded them inside. The doors swooshed closed behind them.

Rhodey shot Bruce a concerned look. This was not a claustrophobia-friendly environment.

Tony fiddled with a holographic display. “Time to get your pixie dust, guys.”

Immediately there was a constriction in Rhodey's chest. The HUD read oxygen levels at thirteen percent, a warning light flashing that it was below safe levels. A hatch opened up above them to reveal a bay the size of a football field. A zero-G football field.

He turned to warn Bruce to stay where he was, but his yell drowned out in the vast stillness of the room. Tony, Steve and Natasha were further ahead, not weighed down by a suit of armor. Even the doctor began to lose his footing on the floor, carried up with the others.

Flying was no news to Rhodey, but doing so in a low-oxygen environment on the recommendation of a man who was locking horns with reality suddenly seemed an even worse idea than it had before.

Tony was the only one having the time of his life. Both Natasha and Steve looked glum, but made silent progress. Bruce, on the other hand, was spinning in circles, making panicked little waves with his hands in an attempt to swim and was, overall, not adjusting particularly well to the sudden change in atmospheric composition.

Doubling back, thrusters on, Rhodey floated up to the struggling doctor and put one gauntlet around his upper arm.

“Gotcha,” he said and began to tow Bruce using War Machine's flight power.

The hatch on the opposite side at the top of the hanger was just coming into view when something else did, too.

It emerged from the shadows, a loud, confused wailing noise heralding its coming on stage. Rhodey almost dropped his cargo as he realized that they were heading straight for the mouth of a full grown Leviathan.

From up ahead Tony and Steve called out almost simultaneously:

“You’re still kickin’, you big ol’ brute!” and “You’re as dead as it gets, Stark!”

The Leviathan, a hulking monstrosity giving an Antonov An-225 a run for its money, took up the lower level of the bay. Rhodey noticed with some relief that it seemed strapped in via a number of torso-thick anchoring devices, most likely the only reason why it hadn’t already gone to town on five unanticipated snacks.

What Rhodey also noticed was a sudden collision warning popping up on the HUD just before War
Machine impacted with what looked like a gross, severed torso, including a half rotten set of organs hanging from it. Bruce squealed as the assaulting body parts brushed past him.

They’d found Tony’s little R&D side project.

“Jesus, he’s been feeding it with corpses,” Rhodey muttered in disbelief. He knew Tony to be deviceful, but this was pushing the boundaries of decency, even for him. Had he been keeping the other creatures supplied to? Rhodey swallowed the question. Better not to have that answered.

Judging by how decomposed some of the bits of Chitauri were, it had been a while since the Leviathan’s last meal. Which probably explained why it champed around them so eagerly, its huge maw opening and closing as they all kicked and swam through the air to get away. Rhodey was up ahead now, passing Steve and Natasha with one arm still dragging Bruce. He really, really hoped the green tinge that the doc sported was nausea and not an impending transformation.

Tony, unfazed, was staring at the space whale with a wondrous grin on his face, as though he were greeting an old friend. An old friend who was going to swallow him whole if he didn't make tracks soon. On the way past, Rhodey grabbed him by the collar, relying solely on the blasters at his feet to power them forward. The lack of palm repulsors slowed them down, but at least it got Tony clear of his suicidal petting zoo project. His friend made an indignant noise, but allowed himself to be carried clear even as he squirmed in Rhodey's grip to look back over his shoulder at the beast.

“Exit, now,” he said. “Let's go, people.”

Tony extricated himself from War Machine’s grip in order to work the hatch controls. Waiting for the outliers Rhodey floated through last and signaled to Tony to get the decompression procedure started. Gravity returned instantly, and Rhodey was thankful for his suit’s gas assisted shock absorbers. Four hundred pounds of steel were suddenly very heavy again.

Steve, the first one to recover from their latest thrill ride, had Tony trapped in a corner the moment his feet touched back on terra firma.

“Are you insane? Is this all a joke to you?” He pointed a finger at Bruce, a gasping, choking mess next to Natasha, who looked a little flush but otherwise seemed to have hardly messed up her hair.

“Do you even realize how dangerous this was?” Steve kept blowing the whistle. “He nearly turned. He would have demolished the place. I swear I've about had it with you!”

Rhodey found it hard to completely disagree with Steve on this one. Tony had pretty much deliberately lied about the oxygen status, not to mention conveniently forgetting to observe that this was the hangar housing the surviving Leviathan. It had been a dick move, mental instability or not. But Steve losing his temper wasn't going to make the situation any better.

Rhodey cleared his throat. “There is a time and place for this. But it’s not now. Not here. Simmer down and we’ll sort it out later.”

“How about no?” Steve snapped. “How about he starts taking some responsibility for his actions? We could have all died.” He rounded back on Tony. “You threw us in there with no prior warning that there was... a... a...”

“...a giant fucking monster whale,” Natasha finished for him, crossing her arms over her chest.

“We've faced those in New York,” Steve continued. “I've seen them take out entire units in one go. Hundreds died.”
“Look, I get it,” Rhodey said. He’d been there himself, watched the behemoths level half of Manhattan. And then Brooklyn. And Queens. Their efforts had been fruitless, until the military had sanctioned grown-up toys and outfitted the Hulk as a live battering ram. “But it's done now. Let’s get out of here.”

“How often are you and Banner going to keep making excuses for this maniac?” Steve demanded.

Rhodey felt something in his throat tighten. Not only at Steve’s choice of words, but also at the tone they were spoken in. He could spot a mile off that this was going south, and fast.

“How about you stand down there, Captain.” His voice was level, but with a sharp bite of authority. “And that's not a request.”

“No, you don't get a say here,” Steve growled between gritted teeth, clearly at the end of his tether. “You're protected from head to toe in armor and you can fly. What about the rest of us?”

Tony opened his mouth to launch into some form of retort, but Cap cut him off at the pass. “That was you, putting the entire team on collision course.” He inched in closer, going from close to too close for comfort. Tony had developed genuine issues concerning his personal space and invasion thereof. It had been bad after Afghanistan and Rhodey wagered a sensible guess that it hadn’t gotten better after the portal.

Steve’s finger was practically resting on Tony’s arc reactor as he went on.

“I'm sorry you've had a shitty four years in space prison. And I'm sorry you've gone and become a junkie. But that doesn't mean that you have carte blanche.” He narrowed his eyes. “You were reckless when we first met you, and clearly you haven't changed. You charge into situations half-cocked and you don't give a damn about anyone but yourself. You'd think you had learned something by now, especially after going and losing a god-damned arm.”

“Woah, Steve,” Bruce murmured, a note of caution in his voice. “That's a bit—”

“No.” Steve was on a roll. “No, it has to be said. If he carries on like this we're all going to end up dead and it's going to be his damn fault.” He bore back down on Tony, glaring at him steely eyed. His next words were quieter, intended just for one set of ears, although in all honesty the whole group had crowded in enough to hear them. “And don't think I don't remember what you did to me earlier.”

Tony, uncharacteristically quiet until now, slapped Cap’s hand away with a growl. “Think you can gung-ho your way out of here? By all means, Captain America. Where are you gonna crash land us this time? What’s it gonna be, huh? Atlantic? Pacific? The fucking Arctic Sea again?”

It was his turn to dole out a denouncing finger at Steve. “I’m not the one stepping over my friends’ corpses to pitch the fucking American flag.”

Steve’s face grew visibly tighter and paler as he listened to the accusations. He grabbed Tony's wrist, squeezing down hard enough to elicit a gasp from the other man.

“You have no right,” he hissed. “You've never fought for your country.”

Rhodey caught Steve by the shoulder, but even War Machine was no match for a super-serum enhanced temper tantrum, and the Captain wasn't budging.

It seemed like once the dam had been broken, there was no holding Steve back.
“Your father would be ashamed of you. Which was the bigger disappointment, do you think? Your promiscuity, drinking and drug use or the fact that every idea you’ve had was derivative of something he’d already thought up? It wasn’t enough to break the man’s heart – you had to spend the rest of your life riding on his coattails, cheapening his legacy even after he died.” Steve’s lip curled back in a snarl. “No wonder you were his biggest regret.”

“Steve, for crying out loud.” Bruce clearly joined in on the general opinion that a line had been crossed. He shot Rhodey a desperate ‘do something’ look.

Tony, familiar with the media’s ongoing efforts to drag his name through the dirt, retaliated with a snort and a lashing out of his own. “Guess I could never live up to daddy’s expectations. Not like you anyway, Captain Cocksucker.”

His wrist was still in Steve vice-like grip so Tony did what he was capable of, that being flipping Steve the bird. As tactful as ever, Rhodey thought.

He still had a gauntleted hand on Cap’s bicep, but honestly, this wasn’t going to end in laughter and togetherness. Not with Steve practically foaming at the mouth. He tried again with diplomacy, although Tony wasn't helping diffuse the situation with his own actions.

“Steve, this isn't getting us anywhere. Stand down. That is an order.”

“After we get off this ship, I'm done with you, Stark.” The contempt was dripping from Steve's voice, who acted as though he hadn't heard a damn word anyone else was saying. “You can go back to your drinking and womanizing and the rest of us can go back to trying to actually make a damn difference.”

“You don’t want to walk out of this holding hands, that’s A-OK with me,” Tony spat back, grunting in pain as Steve’s grip tightened. “Let the fuck go, dickwad.”

“This is who you really are though, isn’t it?” Steve continued in a low, dangerous voice. A lot of things might have been going through his head at that moment, but letting go was apparently not one of them. “All you’re doing is showing your true colors. A spoiled, selfish trust-fund kid who throws a tantrum every time he doesn’t get his way.”

Rhodey decided it was time to boot combat mode. If nothing else, it would give him an edge in thruster capacity. And it looked like he was going to need every decimal he could get.

Everyone started yelling at Cap, in varying volume, to put Tony down. Tony himself was throwing the mother of all shit fits in Steve's grip, kicking and swearing and shouting some fairly unsavory things, all circumstances considering.

But the look on Steve's face was terrifying, like he'd been waiting for years to do this, to finally fulfil his promise of going toe-to-toe with Tony Stark, minus his suit. There was a hint of grim satisfaction about the hard line of his mouth as he continued to hold Tony's arm, batting off his struggling as though he were a misbehaving toddler.

“Captain Rogers, I am not going to repeat myself,” Rhodey said, unwilling to keep watching this one sided sparring match. He didn't like the look in Tony's eyes either, who seemed to be transitioning from anger, to genuine, flailing panic.

“Steve, you need to let go.” Natasha had appeared on the other side, her normally composed expression one of alarm as Tony continued to struggle like a worm on the end of a hook. “Let go. For Howard's sake, if nothing else.”
“The only thing he has in common with Howard is a surname.” Whatever Natasha had intended by invoking Tony's father only seemed to have the opposite effect. “And now he's gone and look at what we're stuck with instead!”

“For fuck's sake!” Tony was swearing, as Rhodey tried and failed to pull Steve off, to wedge himself in between him and Tony, to do something, anything, to separate the two men.

Tony's eyes became suddenly wide and unfocused, like he wasn't quite there. He shut up, all his retorts gone and replaced by an expression of mute, uncomprehending horror.

“Are you even listening?” Steve demanded, out for blood, like he wanted Tony to fight back and give him an excuse to keep going. “Snap out of it!”

The Captain gave him a hard, exasperated shake.

“Jesus Christ, Steve, put him-”

The tell-tale crunch of bone rang out a split second before Tony started to scream.

Chapter End Notes

Introducing the space whale. He just wanted to be loved. And to eat corpses. Poor Leviathan.

Meanwhile, Tony and Steve learn that friendship is magic they hate each other.

"I've given you all that I can. I've laid out the trail, bright and clear. Come on, little mouse. Come find your cheese."

Your thoughts. We want them.
The first moments were complete pandemonium.

Rhodes yelled at Steve, who was giving as good as he was getting. Natasha tried to drag them both off to the side. Over it all Tony screamed himself hoarse, staring down in horror at his one remaining, now broken arm.

Bruce knelt down next to Tony. He had curled up in a ball-like shape, alternating between bedamning all and sundry, calling for Jarvis, and wheezing with the pain of Steve’s manhandling.

Steve himself looked as though he would set off again at any moment if War Machine failed to live up to its engineering expectations. Bruce could hear Rhodes laying down the law. Unacceptable behavior. If he was still in the army that move would have put him in court martial. He needed to get a grip, Natasha said, and not around Tony Stark’s throat. Steve stewed, but kept his distance, giving Bruce space to work.

As in, work on the unwilling subject of Tony, who refused to engage in any manner besides screaming as though stabbed with a butcher knife whenever Bruce attempted to touch him.

Somewhere in the back of his subconscious, the Other Guy stirred. If it wasn't such a dangerous liability, Bruce would have been tempted to let him out if only to see the look on Cap's face mirror the expression that Tony was wearing.

He kept his voice low and even, the tone he used with patients in distress. The one that had now become second nature when addressing the man in front of him.

“I'm going to take a look at your arm,” he said, putting both hands around Tony’s shoulders and propping him up against the wall. There was no objection. Tony had crossed from frenzied to mute shock. He clutched his arm to his chest as though it might fall off if he let go of it.

Coaxing any collaboration out of him took all of Bruce’s aptitude.

There wasn’t much he could say for certain without a radiograph, but the swelling that was already taking hold, and the fact that any movement whatsoever induced a not inconsiderable degree of pain, all pointed to an unpleasant conclusion: a fracture, not displaced, possibly ulnar. A sprain was far less likely, he decided, not with the audible snap from before.

Bruce looked at Tony, wraith-pale and listless. There seemed no conciliatory way to break the news to him.

“I’ll have to splint it,” he said, beating around the bush. It didn’t need a psychoanalyst to interpret what was going through Tony’s head as he looked from the swollen welt on his one wrist to the missing space where his other should have been.

“I…” He paused, voice wavering. He was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. “Oh God, I think… it's not good. It’s not good.”

Bruce poured as much reassurance into his tone as he could muster. “This isn't like last time,” he said. “You’ll be ok. You’ll go home and you’ll be ok.”
Tony looked from his hand to Bruce, but his mind was elsewhere. Facial tics, dilated pupils, muscle tremor. Symptoms like textbook check boxes.

Bruce snapped his fingers in front of Tony’s face. “Hey, stay here. Stay with me, ok?”


Bruce put an arm around Tony’s shoulder, partly for comfort but more as a restraint to stop him from bolting if the next thing he was about to say made him agitated. “Tony, Jarvis isn't here right now. The Iron Man suit blew when the mainframe short-circuited. You kept his chip but he's not operational at the moment. Do you remember?”

Tony squeezed his eyes shut. “This can’t be happening. This can’t be real.”

It was in that moment that Steve chose to interrupt. “I told you,” he said, as if trying to justify what had just happened. “He's totally lost it. He's so strung out on drugs that he doesn't know what he's doing half the time.”

Before he was able to continue, Rhodes was in front of him with one hand up, repulsor ready to fire. “Can it, Rogers,” the Colonel said. “Put a lid on it, or I will.”

“This isn't helping.” Bruce glared at Steve. “Can you just back off for a goddamn minute and let me see to him?”

Natasha caught Steve by the forearm and walked him down the corridor. Bruce heard them arguing in the background, but decided to focus his attention on the problem at hand. He winced. An unintended, but tasteless pun.

He began fishing supplies out of his pack, dressings, tape, a plastic shaft; everything he needed to fashion a splint. Rhodes joined in to support and keep Tony restrained. Between the two of them they worked as quickly and as gently as possible but there was little they could do to quell the discomfort of immobilizing a fresh fracture. Tony endured the treatment with a clamped jaw.

When he was done, Bruce pinched his fingertips to check the circulation under the bandage. It was not the pinnacle of modern orthopaedics, but it would have to do the job until they got Tony into proper medical care.

Despite Rhodes’ request Bruce was loathe to offer Tony any painkillers, having no idea how they would interact with the alien substances in his system. The risks were higher than the benefits, he reasoned. Besides, Tony had lived through worse without the aid of Vicodin. Rhodes seemed to catch on and relented.

Bruce looked at his patient with the guilt of a bystander who’d watched someone get mobbed, but lacked the courage to intervene. “I'm sorry. Are you ok? Can you wiggle your fingers?”

Tony just shook his head, eyes fixed on the middle distance.

“Tony,” Bruce said. “You have to try. Are you with me here?”

“Tones?” Rhodes put an arm on his shoulder.

“I'm here,” Tony said, finding his way back into some form of recognition. “Good.” He moved his arm, which wrenched a moan of misery from him. “Not good.” He tried again, digits twitching as his face contorted in pain. “What am I gonna do without hands? Fuck, fuckohfuck.”
Bruce’s own expression mirrored that of Rhodes. The stunt with the zero-gravity and the whale had been beyond reckless, but Steve hadn’t just crossed the line with his response, the line was a faint dot on the horizon.

He couldn’t see how this situation wasn’t a complete disaster, but at the same time Tony needed some form of reassurance, not a confirmation on how bad the stakes really were. Bruce lied through gritted teeth. “You’ll be ok. This can be fixed. We just need to get back to the shuttle.”

Tony nodded, but didn’t seem convinced. He’d stopped shaking though, which was progress.

“I didn’t mean to, you know.” Steve said, coming back from his enforced stroll. He stood a safe distance away, if only for Natasha blocking his way. “He shouldn’t have...”

From the expression on everyone’s face, even Steve realized that he better not finish that sentence.

“Shouldn’t have what, Captain?” Rhodes demanded anyway. “Was he just asking for it? Is that where we're going with this?”

“You shitbag,” Tony said, his fury springing back to life. “You broke my arm. You broke my only arm.” He shot the team a resentful glare. “I’m done with this. Finished. You’re on your own. Fuck you all! I should have never come.”

“Tony,” Rhodes said. “Be sensible, man.”

“I’m sensible,” Tony said. “I’m gonna go hole up in the engineering sub-basement with J, wait on orbit reentry. That’s the most sensible thing to do. Let the creepers have their way with Captain America. I’ll laugh watching them kick the stuffing out of him.”

“I thought we couldn't go back?” Natasha pointed out. “You’re the one who said the only way now was forward.”

“And even if you can, reentry to orbit will take weeks, if not longer,” Rhodes supplemented. “Your arm needs to be seen to. We have no supplies. And you’re assuming the ship won’t just be shot down on sight. We have no comms up and running either, remember?”

“I don’t care,” Tony said. He scrambled to his feet. “I’m going. Good riddance.”

“Tony, please...” Bruce implored, a dawning sense of horror that Tony genuinely might take his ball and go home and leave them all stranded in the middle of nowhere. “Don’t you want to get back to Earth? You can leave all of this behind.” He took a big swing. “Pepper is waiting for you.”

Tony shot around like a mad bull. “Don’t you lecture me about Pepper. That’s low down dirty.”

He took a deep breath, but whatever composure he was striving for didn’t settle. “You think I came here stocked with marshmallows and roasting sticks the first time around? What’s a few weeks more or less now? I didn’t ride out four years of this for Stars ‘n Stripes to come and beat the living daylights out of me.” He pointed the stump at Steve. “I’m not going if he is.”

“For Pete’s sake, Tony.” Rhodes said. “What do you want us to do? Throw him to the space whale?”

He’ll behave himself. He won’t touch you again,” Natasha said. Bruce wasn’t sure if that was a promise she’d be able to keep. She had said it herself: Steve was nearly indestructible. If he played hard ball, none of them would be a match for him.
Steve glared at her. “Are you my mother or something? Since when are you patronizing me?”

Natasha said, “I don’t think you should be in charge right now, Steve. You’re not thinking clearly.”

By the looks of him, Bruce wasn’t sure if Steve was fit for much. He was far paler than was healthy, even under the unforgiving artificial light. He’d lost a decent amount of blood in their last fight. Bruce wasn’t convinced by his repeated assurances that the bite from earlier wasn’t troubling him as well.

Tony might have been unbalanced, but equally he wasn’t in fighting shape. The worst he could do at this point was trip somebody up. Steve, on the other hand, posed a genuine threat if his serum cross reacted with, say, space spider venom.

“Colonel Rhodes,” Bruce said. “Should take over. Call the shots. Until things calm down.”

“Who just happens to be best friends with him?” Steve said. “I see what’s going on here.”

“What is this, elementary school?” Natasha said. “Unless there’s a second objection Rhodes is in charge and that’s that. For now.”

Tony looked somewhat mollified by this recent development, but proceeded to eye Steve with a murderous glare. “He can’t come near me,” he said. “I want a safety margin.”

“I’ll watch your back,” Rhodes promised. “No more fisticuffs, though. We need to get back to our shuttle, and we need to do it together.”

Nobody spoke to anyone.

Tony, flanked by War Machine as his hulking metal bodyguard, guided the convoy through the myriad of corridors to what was hopefully their final destination. Steve had been banned to the back of the pack, as per Tony’s express request, where he now brought up the rear, plodding behind at a distance.

Natasha, who walked beside Bruce, leaned in to whisper under her breath. “I think that spider bite opened up again. He wouldn’t let me look, but I could feel it. Soggy to the touch. When we pulled him off Stark.”

She followed up with something that sounded alien out of Black Widow’s mouth.

“I’m worried.”

Bruce’s voice was little more than a murmur in reply, wary of Steve's preternatural hearing. “He’s not in good shape,” he said. “I don’t think he’s making good decisions.”

“You think?” Nat arched an eyebrow in mock skepticism. Her face turned serious a moment later. “He’s right in some of what he’s saying, but this isn’t Cap. He’d never chance it at the expense of his team.”

“Next rest stop I’ll try to persuade him to let me take another look at that arm,” Bruce said. But really, what was he going to do besides slap another dressing on it? If Steve’s behavior stemmed from the venom he needed a team of experts with appropriate equipment, not Bruce, who was limited to categorizing the condition of his patients by how many bandages they wore. He felt useless, bringing nothing else to the group than offering half-truths and speculations. Even Tony was able to use his knowledge of the ship to navigate.
Perhaps whatever insecurities were running through his head were playing out on his face, or perhaps she just knew him better than he gave her credit for, but Natasha gave his arm a little squeeze and told him she was glad he was with them.

Lost in the belly of the ghost ship, Bruce forced himself to believe she really meant it.

Minutes turned into hours as they trudged along. Bruce would exchange glances with Natasha or attempt brief, hushed small talk, but broadly speaking, the mood had plummeted like a lead balloon.

Steve had less and less of a spring in his step the further they went. A couple of times Bruce tried to broach the subject of a rest stop, but the Captain shook the idea off, insisting that they’d lost enough progress already. Bruce resisted the urge to remind him that maybe if they hadn't had the unnecessary diversion of him breaking Tony's arm then they might be a bit further along by now.

It got to the point where Steve's breathing became labored, his feet dragging and his right arm tucked protectively in against himself. He looked dreadful. Even Rhodes began to shoot him concerned glances.

The only person who succeeded at resolutely ignoring him was Tony.

“Ok, I’ll say it,” Bruce announced in exasperation. “We're stopping. Taking five. Whatever.”

“We’re not stopping.” Tony said. “If we’re stopping now they’ll take five. Five heads. As in, our heads. No, no. Absolutely not.”

“We’re clear on the motion tracker. No heat signs either,” Rhodes said as he sized up Steve. “How long to the shuttle, Tony?”

Tony planted himself square in the corridor, stomping his foot. “However long it takes. Cap’s gotta suck it up. Stop babying him. It’s barely a scratch.”

Bruce raised an eyebrow. “Didn’t you say it took you a week to recover when you were bitten?”

Tony huffed. “Thought you said Wonder Boy could handle it just fine, serum and all.” He bounced on his toes, biting at the inside of his cheek. “But no, you had to know better. Told you don’t go to the Main Deck, what did we do? Go. Told you don’t shoot the fucking spider because mommy will be pissed. What happened? You got her good and mad. Told you leave Captain America in the safe room, but you were pigheaded as hell. I told you, I told you, I told you. And I’m telling you now, again.” He took a gulp of air. “We. Keep. Moving. If Cap can’t keep up, it’s his own damn luck.”

Bruce frowned. He did not like the spiraling note in Tony's voice. “You were right,” he said, sounding out the terrain. “About a lot of things. But I’m not leaving Steve to-”

“Stop. I’m fine,” Steve cut in. “And I can speak for myself.”

Placating the pair of them was starting to feel like a ‘damn if you do, damn if you don’t’ type of situation. Rhodes shot him a sympathetic glance but stayed out of it. He wouldn’t take sides in bickering competitions, preferring to lead the team with steady hand after the awkward borderline mutiny they’d all staged earlier.

“Steve, you're clearly not fine,” Natasha said. “You look like a roadside corpse. We’ve been walking forever and this delightful trip isn’t over yet. So let us take a breather and let Bruce look at your arm in the meantime.”
“I don’t see what he's expecting to find,” Steve snapped. “I heal quickly, remember?”

“Look, just humor me, all right?” Bruce said. It felt like dealing with Tony all over, but in surround sound.

“Um, hello?” Tony said, looking around in disbelief as everyone settled down for the break. “Is this supposed to be funny? You’re kidding, aren’t you? Drop the red checkered tablecloth. We’re not having a picnic.”

They let Tony ramble. Steve pulled up his sleeve. Bruce drew in a sharp breath at the look of it. The wound had reopened, a foamy yellow liquid festering from between inflamed margins. Even Steve was unsettled by the sight.

“Is that…?” Natasha pointed to the goo leaking out of Cap’s bicep.

Tony had circled around for a cursory inspection. “You know what that is?” he said. “It’s none of my fucking problems. Cheerio! I’ll turn on the seat heaters when I get to the shuttle. Though none of you will make it. A pity.”

War Machine intercepted him on his take-off. “Tony, all the doc wants are five minutes. Why don’t you sit down and have a sip of water? You can have my Evian, if you want. Is that a fair trade?”

Bruce didn’t wait for the consensus, pulling out his med kit. He didn’t even bother to ask for Steve’s permission before he began pouring disinfectant on some gauze and cleaned out the wound.

Meanwhile, Tony was refusing any offers of conciliatory water and got increasingly more vocal about the need to be on the move. Glancing up from his less-than-pleasant task, Bruce noticed that his movements were twitchy, a perfect match to his increasing pace of speech.

So that would be Tony crashing from his drug feed.

Excellent.

Tony abandoned his moot with Rhodes in favor of gyrating back towards them. “Maybe Stevie-boy will lose an arm too,” he said. “Make it poetic justice.”

Bruce tried to ignore him. He kept talking.

“Can your super serum regrow limbs? Wonder who gets the fun job of holding you down while we cut it off.”

“Shut up, Tony,” Steve said.

“He's not losing an arm,” Bruce muttered, before looking at Steve in all earnest. “I mean it. He's just winding you up. Your arm will be fine, we just need to--”

“He's not losing an arm. Of course not,” Tony butted in. “Captain-fucking-America always pulls through. Close the portal, fine. Nobody cares. He can break my arm and you're still fawning over him.”

He gave Bruce a sharp jab in the upper arm which caused him to almost drop the dressing he was holding. “And now we're all going to get killed because Stevie has a boo boo. Fuck that. Fuck that for a game of soldiers! I'm outta here.”

He kicked over Bruce’s bag with the medical supplies and strode off. Rhodes tried to block his path
with a gentle hand on his shoulder. Tony took a sideways leap as if he’d been electrocuted.

“Dude, cool it,” Rhodes said, but withdrew his hold. “Not laying a finger on you. Just wait. Give us a moment.”

“Dead is what we’ll be in a moment,” Tony said, throwing his arms up, splint and empty sleeve alike. “Because you’re tone deaf to what I’m telling you.”

He looped back to gain ground on Steve, only to cut his charge short and resume pacing the other way, as though he was afraid of what would happen if he got within arm’s length of the soldier. But he wasn’t leaving either, despite threatening his departure every second sentence.

For all his trials about the Chitauri ship, it was painfully apparent that Tony's lungs were in fine working order as his incoherent, schizoid ramblings took full crescendo. Bruce could barely follow his train of thought, which oscillated from insulting Nick Fury's parentage to accusing them all of various individual betrayals. Natasha worked with the Russki, Bruce had a fling with Pepper, Steve was the devil himself and Rhodes was possibly not even real. The litany of crimes grew louder and louder.

“Someone put a gag in his mouth,” Steve said. “He's going to alert every monster in a mile radius.”

Rhodes had marched a bristling Tony some distance away. There was a lot of pointing, particularly in Cap’s direction, including some pretty colorful language directed at Rhodes himself, which Bruce speculated would have never even taken form if it weren’t for Tony’s current psychotic presentation. He hoped the airman had enough common sense to not take any of it personally, specifically the vilification of Mrs Rhodes.

All of this was punctuated by a sudden, off-key squeak from Tony, a moment before he shut up and went lax in War Machine’s arms. Rhodes lowered him into a sitting position, propped his head against the wall and said something Bruce didn’t quite catch over the distance. Then he stood up and made his way back to them.

Natasha furrowed a brow. “That was unexpected.”

Bruce, fearing the worst, had leapt to his feet, med kit in hand. Rhodes stopped him in his attempt to pass.

“No need to worry, doc,” he said. “He’s fine. I had to zap him. Sonic taser. Non-lethal, but it’ll keep him quiet for a while.”

Steve said, “You paralyzed him?”

“Temporarily,” Rhodes admitted. He didn’t look proud of what he’d done. “It’s short-term, no after effects. He was hitting the rails pretty hard. I tried to talk him down but he wouldn’t have any of it. He’ll give me Hell about it later, and I’ll happily listen. Over a bottle of Heineken, by the pool.”

“What about the way?” Natasha said. “That’s why we put up with him in the first place. We can’t read the graffiti.”

“I recorded everything as we passed,” Rhodes said. “Merged it, analyzed the patterns and persuaded Tony into showing me a crude track earlier.” He activated his projector, where a holographic render of Tony’s wall art connected to War Machine’s established documentation.

“If we follow this... we should end up back here, which is where we scouted prior to finding Tony. I’ve got full map coverage from there.” He nodded to where Tony was slumped against the wall,
deceptively peaceful. “Besides, he’ll come to in around twenty minutes, hopefully with the torque dialed down a bit. He can give us heads-up on traffic control.”

“And if he wakes up screaming like a banshee?” Steve asked.

Rhodes looked depressed at the prospect, but in fairness it was a fifty-fifty at best. Bruce reckoned that Tony was going to sit out the flight back home in the detention cell, for everyone’s safety and piece of mind.

“If he’s non-compliant I’ll send him back to sleep,” Rhodes said.

Bruce couldn’t help but feel simultaneously impressed and chilled to the bone. The fact that things were bad enough that even Rhodes couldn’t calm Tony down without resorting to violence threw the entire situation into sharp relief. Given that they’d been collectively relying on the Colonel as their resident Stark Whisperer, this was not a happy development.

“Well, I'm not carrying him,” Steve said.

Bruce refrained from adding that he wouldn’t be carrying his own pack if his arm continued to worsen.

They made their funereal procession, muted and sober, with Tony slung over War Machine’s shoulder in a fireman’s carry. The only sound was their footfall and the occasional labored grunting from Cap, who continued to look miserable but was at least keeping pace. Bruce decided to optimistically award the point to his first aid skills.

The environment blended into itself, punctuated by the periodic markings left by Tony. A few were less than obvious and Bruce longed to ask him about their meaning, but he was equally glad of the momentary respite from the other man’s psychotic ramblings.

But seeing Tony’s semi-conscious form bounce against War Machine’s shoulder evoked a distinctly uncomfortable sense of guilt.

They’d showed up, disrupted everything that had been a tentative source of stability to him, fried the door mechanisms, then the whole damn mainframe, and as a result, Jarvis. They’d dragged him into combat, forced him to go on a tour of the sites of some of what were probably his most traumatic memories and now his only remaining arm was broken for absolutely no good reason. Between the events of the last thirty-something hours, the drugs and the four year captivity it was no wonder Tony had gone spiraling over the edge.

Up ahead Rhodes hesitated at an intersection, paused for thought and a quick glance at the map, then opted for a right. Tony’s eyes fluttered for a few seconds and he let out a quiet moan.

“You’re good, bud,” Rhodes muttered. “They’re dusting off the winner’s podium for you. You’re finally coming down the finish line. ”
him very much, too. And also because we think everyone would be back home drinking Pina Coladas if Jarvis was still functioning instead of being a burnt chip in unconscious Tony's pocket.
Tony began to stir at the twenty-two minute mark. Rhodey delayed a halt until his friend’s movements morphed from involuntary to struggling, at which point he motioned for the team to stop. He set Tony down, bracing him under the armpits until he was satisfied that Tony could stand. Tony made an incoherent noise and swayed for a moment, before his face contorted in a half-conscious grimace.

“Iamsoickofyourshit,” he said, the words tumbling from his mouth in a rush of barely distinguishable syllables.

“Don’t worry,” Steve said. “Feeling’s mutual.”

Ignoring him, Rhodey squeezed Tony’s shoulders. Tony’s eyes rolled a little and he moaned, but he did not fall over. Rhodey decided to take this as a positive sign and let go of him.

He had a flashback to Tony’s thirty-fifth birthday, a colloquially ostentatious yacht party off the coast of Dubai. The guest of honor had spent most of it tanked in Hooterville, looking for enlightenment of the double-D variety. By the time Rhodey had found and extricated him from an endeavor that was clearly going nowhere, Tony had sported a similar expression to his current one: peeved, without the clarity of mind to comprehend that he’d almost romped a Sultan’s niece and set off an international business disaster for his company.

Twenty years later they had progressed from international catastrophe to its intergalactic equivalent, and Tony Stark was still at the center of it all.

“Think you can walk?” Rhodey asked.

Tony looked around as if seeing the world for the first time and Rhodey quickly explained, not wanting to trigger another fit because of disorientation. “You zoned out. I carried you. We’re nearly there.”

“Dunthinkso,” Tony said, tongue still affected by the taser. “Imma goin’ back.”

“No, you’re not. We’re taking the beeline,” Rhodey said. “A couple more corridors and we’ll check you in, First Class, premium seating.”

“Premium my ass,” Tony said and turned around, nearly colliding with Bruce. He sought the wall for stability, shambling back the way they’d come.

Rhodey clenched and unclenched his fists, counted to ten, and went after him.

“Tony,” he said, straining to keep his tone sympathetic. “Don’t make me give you a piggyback all the way to Malibu, man.”

“Get lost, Jim,” Tony said. “I’m done. I’ll go to sleep and when I wake up I’ll be home. And if I don’t, it’s all the same to me.”

Rhodey couldn’t believe that they’d relapsed to the controversy of this being reality or not. It seemed a moot point to try and convince Tony that seeking out Jarvis and Iron Man wasn’t going to get him
the results he wanted. He’d probably forgotten all about the chip in his pocket by now. Rhodey thought about the sonic taser, wondered how many more hits Tony could take in his weakened condition. It would be easy to touch one of War Machine’s fingers to his temple and fulfill Tony’s request of absolution.

He really could be off the ship when he opened his eyes the next time.

Rhodey riffled through command prompts on the HUD. It was best this way, he decided. They were almost to the shuttle. He couldn’t allow Tony to sabotage his own getaway.

“What the _fuck_?”

Tony had reached one of his wall markings and was staring at it with big, disbelieving eyes.

“Are you even… are you _serious_?”

Rhodey was, just not in the way Tony insinuated. He entered his credentials to activate the program. A diode sparked on War Machine’s right forefinger as the sonic taser loaded. He walked up to Tony, pretending to show interest in whatever had his friend shook up.

Tony was obviously irked about their current route guidance. He traced the wall map with his finger, from the blue circle that pinpointed their position back the way they’d come. Rhodey had been pleased to find the most direct A to B easily accessible. They’d made up good time, especially without the added impediment of Steve and Tony going at each other’s throats over who had the bigger dick and who was the bigger dick.

“You idiot. You stupid, blind idiot,” Tony said. He was ramping up again.

“Keep your pants on,” Rhodey said. The charging bar was at eighty-five. “What’s the matter?”

Tony jabbed a finger at the wall, only to recoil in pain as he moved his arm the wrong way. “Fuck, Jim. I told you. Are you deaf? You led us right here. Right into the middle of it. Did you do it on purpose?”

This gave Rhodey pause. He checked War Machine’s digital grid overlay. According to the holo they were right on track. Maybe an hour’s march from the hangar bay. A window popped up announcing the taser’s operational readiness.

The team had crowded in around them.

”Wrong way?” Natasha asked.

”Yes,” said Tony, at the same time that Rhodey said “No.”

Rhodey activated the projector for everyone to see. “We’re good.”

“We’re dead,” clarified Tony.

“Why?” Bruce wanted to know, ever the scientist.

“Because this is boo men’s land,” Tony said.

Steve snorted. “How old are you, five?”

“Four, if we count in monster-horror survival years,” said Tony. “Which bests your two-days-in-space PR by, like, loads. So do us all a favor and stick your heroism up your ass.”
And there they went again.

Rhodey held out on the taser in favor of additional recon. “Tony, details. Appearance, numbers, strengths and weaknesses, that sort of thing. Mark me a safe way to the shuttle bay on the projector.”

Tony sketched in a much longer route than Rhodey was comfortable with. It included a not inconsiderable amount of backtracking.

“Give me a break,” Steve said as they all looked at Tony’s suggestion. “That’s like looping around through the backyard if you can just get in by the front door.”

“Yeah, you go ring the doorbell,” Tony seconded. “They’ll love to have you in for dinner. A big juicy serving of American idiot. Take one for the team, Cap. I’ll put on the weeps at your funeral.”

Steve crossed his arms over his chest. “Someone shut him up or I will.”

A warning flashed on the HUD. Rhodey furrowed a brow. “I got motion on the periphery.”

“Well that’s that,” Tony said, not in the least perturbed by the news. “I’d say it was nice knowing you all, but I don’t wanna go over with a lie on my lips.”

This was unanimously ignored. Everyone bar Tony prepared for a potential combat situation. Rhodey now registered three dots on the motion tracker, with one moving at a much faster pace than the others.

“Can we outrun it?” Natasha asked.

“No, you can’t. And it’s them, not it,” said Tony. “As in plural.”

War Machine read the fast dot’s speed at 9.6mph. That was high-end on commercial treadmills. He thought of Bruce and Tony. They wouldn’t be able to keep that speed for long. War Machine could carry them, but War Machine was also an integral part of their monster repelling system. Rhodey couldn’t do both things at once.

Tony was tinkering with a vent grate, a toilsome process considering the state of his splinted arm. He pried open the covering with a grunt.

“Tell ‘em my deepest regrets, but I can’t stick around for the main course. Bon appetit. See you on the other side. Maybe. Probably not.”

And just like that, he was gone.

“Natasha,” Steve growled.

Natasha didn’t move. She looked to Rhodey instead.

“Go. Take Banner with you. Get to a safe place, hole up, we’ll find you.” Neither Captain America or War Machine fit through the vent, but Tony was a rat in a maze. They couldn’t afford to lose him now. “Knock him out if you have to. We’ll say hi to the neighbors and come after.”

Then it was just the two of them.

Rhodey turned to Steve. “We’re clear on the rank order, Captain?” It was critical to have this sorted, now, between the two of them. Before either one ended up wedged between an alien’s teeth like a tired lettuce leaf.
“Yes,” said Steve, looping his arm through the straps on the inside of his shield. “We’re clear.” He paused, then added, “Sir.”

Good. Rhodey went on to outline their plan of action. If this fight was winnable, they would fight it. Otherwise they were to use War Machine’s flight capabilities to dog it and catch up with the others. Bruce and Natasha had trackers on them, so Rhodey was able to easily pinpoint their location. He actively regretted not having the sense of mind to slap one on Tony. If he ran lose it would be that much harder to find him.

The fast dot closed in on the HUD, about to round the corner.

The best description for it, at a glance, was canine interbred with octopus.

That assessment wasn’t set in stone, but it was as good a guess as to why the hound sprouted tentacles from its back. It had scales instead of fur and a layer of slime covered its skin, a trademark among all of the creatures they’d met so far.

Rhodey considered himself more of a cat person in that moment.

To round off its intro the dog shot out one of its tentacles and wrapped it around the M134 mini-gun mounted on War Machine’s shoulder. Uncle Gazpacho bent over like a pretzel as it was pulled off its bracket with barely an effort on the dog’s part.

Rhodey stared like a fool as he was bereaved of his heaviest artillery before the fight had properly started.

Shit.

The dog drew its lips back in a snarl, as if upset that Rhodey had neglected to laud it on its well-performed Fetch.

Then the other two dots got into close-range. They shambled from behind their curtain of darkness, two eight-foot colossi, roughly anthropomorphic in shape.

Rhodey realized with a jolt that these things, not the little pet pug in front of them, were Tony’s boo men. Spikes protruded from their bodies as though they were big city gutter punks. He zoomed in with the HUD and reevaluated his description. They looked more like medieval torture contraptions, Iron Maidens, only on legs and with their insides facing out.

Cap broadened his stance and produced a gun from behind his shield. He opened fire straight into the mass of tentacles on the dog’s back, aiming, hopefully optimistic, for something that was substantial to keeping the creature alive. The dog growled, really miffed but hardly swayed, and took a leap at its aggressor.

It bit a snout-sized chunk right out of the impenetrable vibranium shield. Like it was goddamn cheese cake.

They were so fucked.

“Buckle in,” Rhody said, firing up the thrusters. “We’re hightailing it.”

There was no objection. Steve latched on to War Machine, beating off a set of tentacles as the hound of the baskervilles tried to score a free ride with them.

Rhodey hit the gas, accelerating them to hyper-tentacle speed. The Iron Maidens disappeared in the
dust, much too slow to have a go at the superhero-potluck. The dog gave chase, but only around the next two corners. Then, bored, it abandoned them in favor of playing with its newly acquired chew toy.

Rhodey had loved that assault gun.

“You got eyes on the others?” Steve asked.

Rhodey checked the HUD. The two dots were crowded together, not far from their own location. He hoped Tony was still with them.

“Got ‘em. Just taking the scenic route so we’re losing the groupies.”

Mapless navigating was a bit of a tricky affair. He could see the trackers, but the Chitauri corridor layout wasn’t a perfect match to their route and Rhodey was afraid to blast straight through the walls. Tony’s repeated reminder of not muscling through lockdowns rang in his mind. He didn’t want to barge them into a monster family reunion either.

When they were well out of the hot zone he let Cap dismount and they continued on foot.

“It’s just around the—”

As they stepped through a door into another hallway, the HUD flared up in a blinking mess of bad news. There must have been a disturb signal. Rhodey didn’t know where to look first.

“Jesus. Oh, Christ.”

There was blood, and lots of it. Azure alien blood. Bright red human blood.

Tony slammed into them. He was covered in blood too. A gash on his forehead poured freely.

“God godohgodohgod,” Tony gasped, but Rhodey thought that if there was a God, He must be otherwise occupied at the moment.

He didn’t know how many there were. Six. Seven, maybe. More in the back. Steve pushed past them and threw himself like a battering ram at the frontline. Rhodey grabbed Tony by the collar, hauled him out of the way, and followed Cap into the massacre. He thought he caught a glimpse of Natasha, but he wasn’t sure.

What followed was hard to reiterate in a blow-by-blow breakdown. He pummeled into the fray and immediately the beating began. War Machine was being stripped apart around him. Rhodey ground his jaw so he wouldn’t knock himself out against the endo mantle of his helmet.

The boo men were vicious, and berserk in their assault.

The HUD flashed fifty shades of warnings. Immediate top-to-bottom field service required. Systems compromised. Systems fail. Reload. Diverting energy. Even the little strip of velcro he’d taped to the inside of the face guard to scratch his nose came undone.

Steve reappeared, battered, long lashes of crimson painting his uniform from where the spikes had caught him. He was holding Natasha in his arms. She was off real bad. Rhodey didn’t have time for a closer look, but he knew that they needed to get out of there, like yesterday.

Cap did not need verbal instruction. He pressed past War Machine and was gone, leaving Rhodey to handle the brood.
He risked a glance over his shoulder and saw that Bruce was with them now, admirably still in human form. Tony stood in the doorway, yelling for them to follow him.

Rhodey hung back. There was no way War Machine could take on so many, not with the damage that kept piling on, and not without the shoulder-mounted turret gun. But he could buy time, even if it meant pushing the suit to the max.

Rhodey gave clearance on all remaining weapons systems. They were getting the whole load, sans nuclear. The lucky suckers.

Halfway through the back-up cartridge he found a moment’s respite and used it to thank the heavens that they’d never faced the full force of the Chitauri invasion. Earth wouldn’t have stood a chance.

He unsheathed the gauntlet-mounted pulse cannon. War Machine wasn’t even tickling these things. His only advantage was speed, but that was of limited use in a small-spaced environment like this.

Rhodey decided to take a page out of Tony’s book, who’d emphasized on multiple occasions that he hadn’t survived because he’d beaten these things one-on-one. He’d used his greatest asset instead, his brain, and had outsmarted them.

Rhodey aimed the pulse cannon at the ceiling and pulled the trigger. Smoke and fire and concrete joined the boo men’s inhuman yowls as they were denied the pursuit of their feeding frenzy. The rubble quivered with their mania. They would sink their teeth into metal and stone if it helped quell their hunger.

As he waited to see if they broke through or not, Rhodey sorted out the HUD. War Machine was in dire need of a band-aid and a shopping spree to the next best ammo store. Several systems were offline, permanently, in need of a hardware overhaul if he ever wanted to use them again. The brass would be seething mad when he brought the suit back like this. He hoped that Fury was willing to chip in for at least a new paint job or he’d have to kick the dents out himself before reporting back for duty. But that was pipe dreaming.

The blockade held.

Finally Rhodey dared to turn his back on it.

And froze.

The path ahead was painted with blood. On the walls, in smeared hand prints, on the floor, congealing in puddles.

They’d left him breadcrumbs to follow.

Him, and every other damn thing on this ship that had an appetite for human snacks.

Chapter End Notes

Shit's getting real now.

How badly hurt is Natasha? Will Rhodey survive all on his lonesome and cut off from the group? Find out the answers to these questions next week and a whole bunch of other stuff that you won't be able to un-see (un-read?) by the end of this sorry mess.
In the meantime, some press from Earth-side, a commemorative edition of Newsweek released on the anniversary of Tony Stark's death. We'd love to share one of these articles with you, so we're taking a vote on which one you'd like to read for next week's Easter Egg.

So please let us know in the comments whether you'd like to read:

"Who's left to Avenge?"
"The Death of a God"
or
"Stark's legacy"

and we'll happily deliver.

As always, thank you so much for each and every review! We always appreciate it!
Chapter 18

Chapter Notes

Make sure that "Show Creator's Style" in the upper right corner is enabled, or this chapter might not display properly.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Tony’s voice rang out over the chaos. He was saying something about a med bay. Ahead of him, cradled in Captain America’s arms, Natasha’s head lolled back, bouncing and jerking as they ran a race against time.

Tony gave directions, stopped ever so often to activate shutter mechanisms behind them. They rolled down, bang-bang-bang, separating them from the death wave on their heels. Steve yelled that Rhodes was still out there.

Tony kept triggering the lock-downs anyway.

He was dead, Tony said, had to be, and if they didn’t want to share a grave they had to keep the monsters occupied. They launched into an argument, which Bruce tuned out. His focus was on Natasha, on trying to get a glimpse of her limp form in the Captain's arms, tallying up the damage she'd sustained.

They crashed into what Tony kept calling the med bay. There was equipment, but very little looked suitable for human use. Steve cleared a table and laid Natasha on it. Bruce shoved him out of the way. For a moment he was overwhelmed. Blood gushed out of her in great spurts.

He pulled out his kit and spread it on a nearby trolley. A Guedel airway was the first thing he grabbed, shoving it down her throat, with Steve enlisted on ventilation with a bag valve mask. He took a pair of scissors to her suit, revealing the worst of the damage:

Supracondylar fracture with soft tissue involvement. The subclavian was torn open. Thoracic trauma, possible organ penetration. Already her abdomen began to bloat.

Bruce took a deep breath, rolled up his sleeves, and forced his hands to stop shaking. He was a doctor. She was a patient.

He had a job to do.

Beside him, Tony was proffering a box of ampules filled with yellow liquid. “That’ll help. Give her a few. Give her a few of those.”

Bruce shook him off. Shoving a load of unknown substances into her was not a good move. He needed to keep a clear head, work with familiar variables and avoid unnecessary complications.

He grabbed Tony by the arm and stuffed his stump into the gushing hole that had been Natasha’s armpit. “Lean on this as hard as you can. She’ll bleed out if you let go.”

It was frightening how calm his voice sounded, at odds with what was hammering in his chest.
He ripped open a sterile wrapper, in it one cannula (orange, 14G). Bruce went for her arm, hunting down a vein.

Pink spume spilled from her lips as he pressed for a pulse. She moaned, but he wasn’t sure if it was intentional, or if he’d just unwittingly manipulated her airways. Natasha’s eyes were open, but only the whites were visible.

It took him six tries to IV her. Her vessels were parched, pumping empty. They needed to get fluid into her, everything they had, as fast as they could. She was already hypovolemic.

“Steve,” he said. “The saline. All of it. Don’t stop.”

The scalpel glinted in his grip.

He tried to remember where to place the incision line. Running his fingers over her chest, he counted down the ribs, one, two, everything was slick with blood. He settled for the third intercostal.

He was a GP, for God’s sake, not a surgeon, already four years out of practice since working for Pepper and SI. He’d never performed a thoracotomy before, had only ever seen it done once. He had never done a residency or trained in trauma, having gotten his degree in Moldova what a shithole after the US army had hounded him off the continent and put a lid on his nuclear physics career.

What the Hell was he doing here? killing her, and with great success

He only realized he’d stopped moving when Tony’s splinted hand wrapped around his own and jerked it down. The scalpel rammed into Natasha’s body. She gave off a sound like a balloon deflating under water.

He slipped the tube in, tried to give his hatchet job some semblance of order, the only way he was ever getting inside her struggling to find the hole under so much blood.

“She’s gonna die,” Tony said.

“I won’t let her,” Bruce answered.

Everyone seemed to believe him, believe in him, Steve looking on with hopeful anxiety and Tony accepting his claim like a child who wanted nothing more than everything to turn out ok. Bruce Banner, unqualified trauma surgeon, looked at their faces and almost believed in himself.

It took all of four seconds to shatter that brief onrush of hope.

“Jesus fuck,” said Tony.

Blood pooled around her mouth, but it wasn't frothing anymore. It bubbled next to the Guedel, in sync with Steve’s ventilation.

Her chest stopped rising and falling. The spurting in her neck died to a slow ooze. Her lips were turning grey underneath their slick coat of blood, eyes half-lidded, unresponsive.

“Pressure!” he snarled at Tony, pushing his stump deeper into the wound. He was vaguely aware of Steve taking over, helping pack gauze in.

There was still a chance.

There had to be a chance.
a snowball’s chance in hell

Bruce knocked instruments to the floor and climbed onto the trolley beside her. He interlaced his fingers for chest compressions.

One - two - three - smash - five - six - no

“Put your damn arm back in there!” he yelled at Tony, fucking useless cripple who’d pulled his stump out of her armpit again. His voice was a dangerously low growl. Tony’s eyes widened, and he complied.

One rib cracked. Then two.

Steve was doing the ventilation all wrong.

“Please, please, please—”

He begged and pushed, begged and pushed. Her intestines kept bulging in and out of the puncture wound in her abdomen. And he knew, with all of his medical knowledge, that what he was doing was useless, that half her blood volume was on the floor where it belonged. She needed major surgery, not a bag of saline and a botched chest drain in a grubby alien med bay.

But he couldn't possibly stop, because that would mean she was really dead, and she couldn't be that.

He couldn’t say at what point the meat under his hands began to turn cold.

Beside him there was the clatter of Tony dropping to his knees, exhausted, the first to realize that there was no coming back from this.

“Oh god, Bruce—”

“Epinephrine!”

His own voice was constricted. Natasha’s ribs kept crack-smashing under the heel of his palms.

Tony stepped away, but not to get the epi.

Bruce hated him in that moment, with all of his heart.

Steve caught him by the arm. Bruce shook him off angrily. Why the fuck were they quitting? They couldn't quit! If they broke it off then it meant that this thing, this unspeakable, horrific thing was reality.

As soon as he let go, she wouldn't be Natasha anymore, she would be Natasha's corpse.

He wasn't ready, wasn't at all capable of processing that. because it’s so hard to grasp, genius

“Bruce,” Steve said. “Bruce, it's over.”

His vision swam with panic. He hyperventilated. For a moment everything was green blurry. He kept pushing smashing on her chest, until Cap caught his arms. He struggled and snarled and fought, not Bruce, not the Other Guy, just a wild, panicked animal.

In a way he thought it was better that someone else was stopping him, because he would never stop, would never be able to forgive himself for stopping.
Cap’s arms looped around his torso. They toppled off the trolley onto the floor, where her blood waited to soak through his trousers. He drew his knees up to his chest and began to rock back and forth, the past sound of cracking ribs a lullaby that failed to soothe him.

For a moment he was back in New York. They sat opposite of each other in a coffee shop. He watched, fascinated, as she talked, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. The curve of her earlobe was strangely perfect; framed in red, hitting the yellow sunlight that streamed through the tinted windows. Little strands glowing like fire.

She’d smiled at him, and asked what he was staring at. He'd cleared his throat, and gulped his tea, and pretended that he thought he’d seen someone he knew, but must have been mistaken.

It was the stench that brought him crashing back. The place was like a butcher's shop. It smelled delicious disgusting, turned his stomach. Bruce smeared his bloody hands over his face.

Steve Rogers was staring down at him, his eyes flitting backwards and forwards between Bruce and the crime scene that he’d left in his wake.

Tony gaped as though maybe there was another rabbit that Bruce had left to pull out of his hat. He wasn't. He wasn’t some fairytale magician - he could not kill the woman he loved twice over.

Had he loved her though?

It wasn't as if he could wake her up, and ask if he’d ever stood a chance to fuck her. There was something fundamentally wrong with him to even entertain such thought. He'd just murdered her with his own negligence, yet there he was, being a selfish prick.

“You did everything you could,” Steve bleated spoke the generic condolences.

Bruce told him to FUCK OFF. It came as a soft mumble into his hands at first, and then, when the Captain put a comforting hand on his shoulder, he screamed it at the top of his lungs.

Something began to stir. Something that had perked its head from its inside prison the moment it smelled death and despair. Something that could feel the wells of anger rising, the self hatred that threatened to spill over and drown him.

It you, that’s you fed on his misery like a leech gorging on the blood of its victims.

He looked at his hands. Green crawled beneath the surface. There must have been something in his eyes, too, because Tony looked terrified, was backing himself to the other side of the room.

“Dr Banner.” That was Steve, his voice an underwater echo. “You have to…”

But he couldn't hear what he had to do. There was the rushing tide of his own rage grief, the blood pounding in his ears, that something screaming inside him, demanding to be let out of its cage.

And the problem was that part of him wanted to let it happen c-o-w-a-r-d to go free-falling into the green. It would mean he wasn't here but somewhere else, mute and numb and gone. He bit down on his lower lip so hard that he drew blood. The Other Guy liked it.

It crept up on him like a rush, a bad trip that wouldn’t be stopped. The human, semi decent part of him begged and pleaded that he didn't mean it liar that he didn't really want to let go. It was nothing compared to the anger and the hurt that made up the other part of him - the itch under his skin, the thing that thirsted for the coppery aroma of blood.
Bruce Banner who? was only a mask to the monster lurking underneath.

this is why they should have locked you up

Bones snapped, reset, elongated. Skin stretched. Muscle expanded. Pop-pop-pop went his joints. He felt sinew rip, every piece of his body torn apart, only to be forcibly remodeled.

He plunged into the pain, but it wasn’t Bruce screaming anymore, it was the distorted in-between of Bruce and Not-Bruce.

Not-Bruce took over like this was ever going any other way. It grabbed him by the throat and shoved him sprawling bye into a deep, dark cage somewhere in the back of his psyche.

And then came darkness.

He got his puny wish.

Chapter End Notes

Writing this made us sad.

That is all. :(

The winner from last week’s vote was Stark's Legacy so have at it, dearies.
Rhodey trailed armored fingers over the shutter. He looked around for any relay boards, some sort of console responsible for the door mechanisms. Repulsor tech did jack shit against the five-inch steel barrier, or whatever the Chitauri equivalent of that was.

Disappointed, he abandoned the endeavor.

Clearly this had been the way they’d come, and clearly they’d thought War Machine wouldn’t follow. Rhodey felt a pang in his chest, as though he’d just lost a pivotal round of musical chairs and hadn’t gotten to his seat in time because he’d been busy doing the Macarena with Tony’s boo men.

Looking at it from a strategic perspective, however, he probably wouldn’t have done otherwise. The troop came first, and the flag came second. God bless America and all the ships at sea.

Rhodey let the face plate pop back into place, and checked the HUD.

It was going to have to be the long way around, then.

War Machine groused with the need for an oil change. Analogous to the team, Rhodey was leaving a personal trail of mechanical blood in his wake. He’d stopped briefly to plug the crassest damage, but there was no talking around the bad condition of the suit.

One boot thruster was down. Wires hung like guts from deep clefts in the metal. Rotation on the left shoulder joint reduced to sixty-five percent. Rhodey had pulled out the responsible culprit himself; a souvenir spike, courtesy of one of the boo men. It had wedged itself into plating, but had, miraculously, failed to penetrate Rhodey’s own body. Thank heavens for small mercies.

He checked on the location of the trackers marked NR (Natasha Romanoff), BB (Bruce Banner), and SR (Steve Rogers) on his digital map. All three were bunched together half a mile’s distance away as-the-crow-flies. Rhodey called up War Machine’s video logs and replayed the battle footage. He freeze-framed Tony, who looked like he was intentionally photo-bombing the shot, if not for the layer of blood on his face. But he was standing, no matter what other injuries might be hidden from War Machines HD camera, and Rhodey optimistically tagged him Green - ‘wait/walking wounded’. Care needed, but more critical injuries came first.

He stopped the film again as Cap emerged with Natasha in his arms. One perfunctory glance and Rhodey decided: Red - ‘immediate’. That’s what they were doing there, he realized, in their three-dot circle. Licking wounds, reevaluating. Trying to boost Natasha into Yellow.

Rhodey hoped Tony was with them, that he was still riding along in Sanity Express, and that the reason for Natasha, Bruce, and Steve snuggling up like kittens taking a catnap together wasn’t because Tony had closed a shutter in their faces too.

Hasta la vista, Rhodey could hear Tony say, who had always been a big fan of Schwarzenegger’s sci-fi crusades. I won’t be back, babies.

He quickened his step, the whirring of War Machine’s busted joints echoing through the cavernous walkway. With one thruster down he could technically still fly, catch them up in Mach speed. But he only had thirty-eight percent juice, and a not-so-funny feeling in his gut that told him not to blow all
the gas before he made it through the finish gate.

So Rhodey walked.

He looped around the barricade pretty easily - maybe that should have been a suspicious sign in itself - and estimated himself maybe a twenty to thirty minute walk away from the dotted cluster on the map.

Then BB made a jolt and began to move out of the refuge. Fast. Fast And Furious kind of fast, only more furious than fast.

SR took up pursuit.

Rhodey waited with baited breath for a move from NR. Maybe they had been assaulted by The Thing From Another World and were scrambling instead of fighting. Or maybe Tony had chosen this moment to hop off the Sanity Express, and they were in the process of re-acquiring him. It could mean a hundred other things too, and only few of them were forward-looking possibilities.

NR did not follow BB and SR.

Tony could be back in one of his vents playing Hide-And-Seek.

Or they were dealing with a genuine Code Green.

Fuck the battery life, Rhodey thought, and booted up the thrusters. Thirty minutes turned into ten (and thirty-four percent), when Rhodey intercepted Cap at an intersection. He was breathing hard, exhausted, but relieved to see a friendly face.

“Banner,” Steve said.

“Shit.” Talk about premonition. “The others?”

“Back at the medical station. We need to put a lid on this before he puts a hole through the hull.”

Rhodey glanced at the motion tracker. BB was gaining ground.

“Can I give you a lift?”

Cap grabbed for the handle on War Machine’s back. “Thought you’d never ask.”

Tracking the Hulk was not difficult. They crept along the path of their quarry—a trail as plain as a line of breadcrumbs.

They came across one of the spiked creatures. Its head had been torn clean off its body, which now lay a few feet away from the rest of it. Arms and legs had been plucked off and were thrown on a pile, as though a child had torn the wings off a moth.

“Guess that’s one less monster we have to worry about.”

Rhodey stared at the track of devastation ahead of them. Wires were ripped from the ceiling, metal buckled like cardboard; there was a Hulk-sized hole in the wall wherever he’d taken the pass on using a door. Forget all of Tony’s preaching on ‘no muscling through the lockdown’. Apparently you just had to pack the right size and attitude, and it was a breeze.

“He’s slowed down some,” Rhodey told Steve, projecting BB’s position on the map for the Captain
to see. The dot flickered sometimes. Damage to the positioning system, or more artifacts. Something about Chitauri architecture jammed the signal, and it had done so to varying degree since he’d boarded the ship.

They discussed what they would do once the Hulk had been caught up. Odds were that they’d see themselves faced with an eight foot green goliath instead of a spindly nuclear physicist. A head-on approach was out of the question. War Machine couldn’t afford to take the beating, not with a ship full of other party attendees. Cap might have been a qualified player, but not in his current state. His uniform was shredded in places, and little of it retained a blue color. If it came to a one-on-two, the Hulk would squat them like mosquitoes.

Steve proposed that they lure him into the Leviathan’s holding bay. That way he could get it out of his system in zero G. They’d just collect Bruce once the fuse had burnt out. It wasn’t a half-bad idea, if not for BB pioneering unknown terrain on Rhodey’s map; his advances were steadily into parts unexplored.

A distant bellow tore through the corridor.

“Come on,” said Rhodey. “Let’s hustle.”

They hustled, but not at full tilt. Rhodey was hovering in the upper twenties now, so unless they found a power outlet that was War Machine compatible, he really had to watch the percentage. The Hulk was moving into the belly of the ship rather than towards its hull, so they could at least shelve one hot potato for the moment.

Then again, if the Hulk was out for blood he’d aim smack-dab center for monster manger.

They came upon a kennel of Chitauri dogs, or rather, what was left of them. Rhodey stepped over a bundle of limp tentacles. He counted ten, but the original number could have been higher. They were in varying amounts of dismemberment. The Hulk had torn through them like a midwest tornado plowing through a Kansas cornfield, and there had been no storm cellar for these unlucky puppies to seek shelter in.

Rhodey pursed his lips. Another malfunction on the motion tracker. He’d seen no trace of a party, only BB’s dot slowing down momentarily. Off the top of his head he’d attributed it to the Hulk maybe catching a breather. He wondered, obscurely, what would have happened if their merry little group had walked into this kind of skirmish. It had taken only one space-pug to strip War Machine of its most effective weapon. Ten of these things...

“Colonel.”

Steve was bent over limbs and entrails.

Rhodey joined him, and immediately a window popped up on the HUD to confirm Steve’s findings: low-dose gamma emission.

“The Hulk bleeds, sir.”

Rhodey was oddly disappointed that the puddle wasn’t green. He’d always expected that it would be, for some reason.

“At least he’s taken out some trash for us,” he remarked grimly and looked at the pet cemetery around him.

“Come on,” Steve said, gripping his shield a little too tight. “Can’t be far now.”
Whatever internal Hulk-detector Cap had going, he wasn’t wrong. The smell wafted towards them first, followed by the whimpering. Whimpering, at least, was the closest parallel Rhodey could think of. He’d met a guy once, fresh out of the sandbox after a frag had pulverized both his legs. The poor private - what was his name? Andrews? Abbotts? Anderson? - had made that sound every night Rhodey passed by the red cross tent. You could hear it a mile off, that ghoulish, passing mewl.

Something that looked like both its legs had been pulverized by a frag grenade lay in the middle of a larger cavern. It could have been a distant relative to terrestrial reptiles, but you really had to squint hard and have a vivid imagination to draw the right connections. It was the originator of the sound. Half its jaw was missing. Even if it wanted to, it wouldn’t be able to do anything more than whimper.

They put it out of its misery. It was the only decent thing to do.

Beside it was one of the Iron Maidens, throat ripped out in a messy Columbian necktie. A second, smaller reptilian thing stretched out some distance away. Its brains were splattered mostly along the ceiling. Or maybe those were its guts. Rhodey wasn’t sure.

Steve let out a huff of frustration. “We need to find him.”

Rhodey looked for the BB dot on his screen. There it was, flashing right in front of his eyes. He refreshed the map, frustrated with the malfunctions. But BB was hanging tough.

He let his face plate slide open and surveyed their surroundings, as though his own two eyes might detect more than the HUD’s multi-layered interface. Something wasn’t right here. Had the Hulk dropped the tracker in the brawl?

The dead reptilian alien at their feet twitched. Both Rhodey and Steve recoiled. As a rule, dead reptiles - at least back on Earth - did not twitch. What’s gone is gone, and there ain’t no bringing it back. Somebody needed to tutor this thing in elementary biology.

Cap raised his shield, ready to finish the job a second time over.

“Wait.”

Steve wavered. “What?”

Rhodey re-checked the HUD, then dared to crack a tentative grin. Maybe it wasn’t glitching at all.

“I think I found us a needle in a haystack. Give me a hand.”

Together they pushed the worst of the offal and gore aside. Then they moved the very lifeless reptilian body away.

Covered in innards and slime was Bruce Banner, naked, and curled up in the fetal position with his arms over his face. His whole frame racked with silent whimpers. Not whimpers, Rhodey corrected himself. Sobs.

Bruce opened one eye and looked at them, but his gaze was foggy and unfocused.

Cap bent slowly down.

“Dr Banner?”

The lack of clothes gave them a splendid overview over Bruce’s collected battle scars. It was hard to
tell how much of the blood coating him was his own, but a claffing gash drew up the backside of his
calf. His back looked like someone had taken cat-o-nine tails to it. Rhodey exchanged a worried
glance with Steve. This wasn’t just a scraped knee and a bump to the head.

If this was what Bruce looked like now, Rhodey didn’t want to think about how this last fight had
gone down. He wasn’t familiar with the doc’s transformation process, but didn’t exclude the
possibility of them finding Banner instead of the Hulk only because the latter had been outrivaled by
whatever wasn’t presently lying in pieces around them.

Rhodey’s suspicions hovered on the unmissable slime spoor leading away from the mise-en-scene.

He opened his mouth to red-flag his observation when suddenly Bruce broke out in tears. “I'm sorry.
Oh God, I'm so sorry!”

“Dr Banner, Bruce. It’s all right.” Steve kept trying, loathe to touch him for fear of triggering the
demon within. “Please. Try to stay calm.”

At this Bruce only choked harder, and drew himself up into a semi-sitting position. The Hulk’s
redecorative efforts were hard to miss unless you willfully shut your eyes. Bruce was propped on his
elbow, blinking and groaning as he looked stupefied at their surroundings.


“You don’t remember?”

Bruce moaned and said wearily, “I never do.”

A curse within his curse, Rhodey thought, and wondered what it had to feel like to be there one
moment, and gone the next. Maybe it was a mercy too. Before SHIELD had recruited Bruce and his
alter ego as a validated person of mass destruction (yes, there was a term for that), the Hulk had taken
a heavy toll on human lives in his unchecked state. Not remembering might be the better alternative,
although Rhodey supposed that it hardly lessened the burden on the doc’s conscience.

Bruce looked around, dazed. “Where are we? Where are-”

Instantly he paled, a dawning horror spreading across his face, maybe interlaced with the faintest hint
of green. “Oh… no no no, no.” He shook his head, raking his hand through his hair. “Natasha,
she’s…?”

Steve looked at the ground.

Instantly, alarm bells began to blare in Rhodey’s head.

“Wait, didn’t you say-- you said they were back at the med bay.”

“They are.”

“But now you’re saying Natasha’s-”

“Dead,” confirmed Steve, and something hitched in his throat as he uttered that one word.

Rhodey said nothing, while Bruce buried his face back in his hands. He could form a rough picture
of how it might have gone down, the way she’d looked in Steve’s arms on the video review, the
extensive injuries she’d sported; Red - immediate care needed.

He could even forgive them for locking the shutters behind them, probably in a panic as they dashed
for a safe haven. It didn't take a genius to figure out the rest.

Him and Steve locked eyes. They'd both seen their fair share of deaths in their respective careers, Cap in 1940’s Germany and Rhodey in modern times’ Middle East. War was fought on the backs of active duty soldiers, and no war had yet been fought without casualties. This was the moment where civilians would offer condolences, but a shared glance between two military men was enough incitement to underline the importance of putting grief away in favor of focusing on the present. At least for now.

And then something else occurred to Rhodey, something that made him remember the look on Steve's face as he snapped Tony's arm.

“Wait, are you telling me-” He tried, but failed to keep his voice in check. “You left Tony alone… with a corpse?”

Even Bruce looked up at that, the testimony of Natasha’s death overlapped with the realization that she might have died for no purpose at all if Tony slipped through their fingers again.

“I couldn’t exactly take him along,” Steve said. “I prioritized. The Hulk came out on top.”

“And if he’s-”

“I locked the door. He’ll be there.”

“This is all my fault…” Bruce mumbled to himself. Rhodey ignored him. It was far past the point where they had time to indulge in self-recriminations.

He nodded to Bruce’s leg instead, wanting nothing more than to fire up the thrusters and go back for Tony.

“We need to make tracks. How bad is it?”

Bruce looked down at his own injuries as though registering them for the first time. “Oh shit,” he said. “That's not good.” He prodded at himself. “It won't be like this for long, I think. One of the perks of being a monster.”

“Something got you real good,” Steve said.

Rhodey swallowed his anger at the Captain, and pointed to the trail he’d noticed earlier. “Something like that?”

Bruce frowned as he saw it. “That looks… big.”

“Motion tracker's clear for now,” said Rhodey. “But my gut tells me the two of you didn’t part ways as BFFs.”

“Which is why we shouldn’t stick around for the make up,” said Steve, although Rhodey suspected he was beginning to second-guess his decision about bailing out on Tony.

Bruce seemed a little dubious about the proposal. Enhanced healing was all good and fine, but right now his leg and back looked like someone or -thing had put him through the mincer. The last thing they needed was for the med guy to pass out with no one available to treat him.

And the medical station was an interminable hike away, longer if Bruce sported a limp. They did not have that time. They needed to get back to Tony ASAP, before he figured out a way to free himself
from his latest pen.

“You two should go on without me,” Steve said, apparently thinking along the same lines. He nodded at Bruce, who was shaking like a wet dog. “You can fly him back, get him fixed up. I’ll catch you.”

“And if that thing catches you first?”

“Splitting up is about the worst possible idea,” Bruce said with surprising conviction, given the state he was in. “Last time we tried that, it cost Natasha’s life. I’m not putting Steve at risk too.”

Rhodey said nothing.

All he could think of was that, for Steve Rogers’ sake, they had better not be returning to find two corpses for the price of one.

Chapter End Notes

So you might be disappointed that, since this is all from Rhodey’s POV, we didn’t get to see much of the Hulk in action.

To make up for it, we made a hyper-realistic simulation of what happened from Hulk’s POV.

(You’ll need a browser with Flash installed. Controls are: left and right arrows to move, space bar to fire)

Thank you so so much for all the reviews. We were kind of overwhelmed with how lovely everyone was about the last chapter. We really, really appreciate your thoughts and kind words. <3
There was the haze and the darkness, and the in-between, which was filled with pain. The pain was cyclic; it rose and fell and rose and fell, like the beat of a catchy song on repeat.

Kind of like Brian May’s killer solo in Bohemian Rhapsody.

_I see a little silhouetto of a man,_
_Scaramouch, Scaramouch, will you do the Fandango?_

He could not tell how much time passed, with the haze and the darkness, and Queen’s adagio piano chords the only benchmarks in his drab universe. He had no idea what was happening, or where it was all going down, and he cared to know neither. He wished he was dead, only trapped in the pain-haze, he forgot all about wishing it.

This darkness was very different from the darknesses he was familiar with. It was not the darkness of the attic-closet, where he’d played Hide And Seek with Howard Stark (oh, please don’t find me, dad!), and it didn’t compare at all to the darkness of the desert cave, wet and musty and filled with the lingering smell of cheap cigarette butts. It wasn’t like Jarvis’ darkness either, the warm, cozy tingle just before the HUD dimmed and Jarvis said ‘good night’ and sent him off into a blackness that lasted for months.

This darkness was cold and intrusive; a nightmare beast that had clamped its jaws around his consciousness. He wriggled from its grasp, increment by increment, accompanied by the steady pain and haze and _easy come, easy go, will you let me go?_

_Bissmillah! No, we will not let you go! Oh!_

It came to him, in a sluggish drift, that he hung. Not upside down like a ringmaster in a Cirque du Soleil show, and not remotely like Tony Stark nine months into his space odyssey, with a wire noose around his throat. He hung from his arm, as though he’d wedged it somewhere above his head, and all his weight was now suspended from his shoulder joint. He thought of a greedy kid getting his hand stuck in a cookie jar, his personal favorite being Oreos, Double Stuff Heads or Tails. Mostly Heads.

Maria Stark had never believed in cookie jars though, so he quickly dropped that thought. Cookie jars had no place in antagonistic darknesses anyway.
Tony moaned. It was the first conscious noise he remembered making, a loaded croaky thing that climbed up his throat and out of his mouth like some come-alive cat hairball. It was really more of a pain-belch than it was a moan.

Several things registered through the haze-darkness.

The pain was worse (much worse) now that he was aware of it. It was a top-to-bottom kind of pain, starting at the top, his fingertips, and shooting all the way to the bottom, in this case, his shoulder joint.

He could not open his left eye. It felt like that once, after Howard had backhanded him for hiding away in the attic-closet. He’d also hit Maria that day, and smashed a bottle of Johnny Walker against the kitchen floor. All three of them — Tony, Johnny and Maria — would never forget the incident and the sweet-sour breath on Howard’s lips.

Freddie Mercury had died twenty-five years ago, only to be resurrected in the pain-haze-darkness, to the sorry audience of one unlucky bastard.

The moaning turned into groaning, in cadence with the surging of the pain. His fingers spasmed, tingling (not in the Jarvis-way), and Tony’s eyes went wide, the left one opening only a slit.

Several more things sunk in.

He half-sat, half-hung, and his right arm was tied above him to a solid fixture. He looked up and, a one-eyed examination later, concluded that his arm was hooked to a pipe in the wall by a set of handcuffs, and that the fingers poking out from Bruce’s splinting job looked like fat, blue grubs about to burst.

Tony sprung to his feet, slipped on something slippery, and landed full force on his back. The tug on the bracelets was an out-of-this-world experience.

He didn’t scream — he howled.

The pain-haze and the darkness swept over him like a tidal wave.

It was Raza in a cave in Afghanistan, not Freddie Mercury on his 89’ world tour, who said:

“You better take a breath, Amerifag, cause you gotta hold it loooooong!”

The haze and the pain and the darkness could all take two running jumps and go to Hell.

Tony was wide awake. It was hard to be anything else but WIDE AWAKE when you were hanging suspended by your one remaining arm (which was concurrently also your one broken arm) and your fingers were numb but also on fire, because the ass who chained you up had done a piss poor job of checking for circulation before he’d abandoned ship.

Tony knew one thing and one thing only in that moment: he’d knock the life out of Captain America the very second he found a way to get his arm out of those stinking cop locks.

He remembered with striking clarity the click-clack-clack of the cuffs as Steve had shackled him to the wall.

After he’d french-kissed Tony in the face with a fist.

That little detail was pretty memorable, not least because of its imminent after effects; a very comely
black eye and one hell of a brain pain.

The smooching had taken place right after Bruce had gone all mean and green, grabbed his girlfriend by the arm, and flung her across the room with all the wrath of the Lord, Amen. Natasha still lay slumped in the corner, dislocated neck and all, just like the good green doctor had put her there. Her jaw was angled open. Tony suspected it had cracked on impact, like pretty much every other bone in her body too.

“Didn’t work out for you, huh?” he found himself asking, a little nasally. Steve really packed a mean punch. Natasha didn’t grace him with an answer.

How could she even, with her head bent around like that? It was not a very cozy position. Tony could count himself happy that he was hanging from one arm, as opposed to supporting the floor with his busted open forehead.

Which looped him right back to the problem at hand — and no one, NO ONE, dare make a joke about that — as he looked from the Cheshire-cat grin on Natasha’s lips to his bloated fingertips dangling in their steel noose.

Oh, that good-for-nothing, that prick, that backdoor bandit! Captain America had it coming, had it coming real bad. Tony wanted to hear him beg for it, the same way Tony had begged his daddy to stop when he’d been nine-and-a-half, and his mother had cut herself on a shard of old Uncle Johnny on the kitchen floor.

Only Tony wouldn’t stop with the disciplining this time, the same way Howard hadn’t back in Tony’s childhood. Because Steve deserved it, even if he didn’t know it yet. He’d been a naughty boy, Steve-o, and naughty boys were frowned upon in the Stark household.

Even Natasha agreed; not verbally, of course (she’s dead, for Pete’s sake, get that in your head!), but her face bobbed down in a facsimile nod as the blood steadily relocated from inside her body to a big, lukewarm puddle on the med bay floor.

Tony remembered all too vividly whose blood had formed snug puddles on that very floor some one and a half years ago. As a hint, it hadn’t been a perfidious, red-headed devochka’s.

Take an ass-whoopin’ deep breath, he’d told himself back in the day, holding out his left arm covered by the gauntlet (he’d put it on so he wouldn’t have to look at blue grub-like fingers), take that breath cause you’re gonna need it.

And Lordy, had he needed it! He’d screamed all the air out of his lungs only to draw it in again, so he could go for round two, and three, and twenty-eight. He’d been unsatiable for the riff-raff of the bone saw. And all the while Jarvis had said, ‘Do keep calm, sir. Steady hands, steady hands.’

Like cutting off your own arm could ever be a calm affair. Tony had pissed himself in fear and pain and had kept on screaming through it all. His lungs had expanded and contracted like a goddamn accordion. He’d definitely bested Freddie’s five octave vocal range that time.

He wondered, as he flexed his numb fingers, how he was going to gazump his way out of this one. Not by singing Bohemian Rhapsody in his head, for sure. *Galileo, galileo!*

Last time he’d still had the suit, a laser cutter, and Jarvis’ dulcet English voice (*Galileo, figaro, magnifico!* ) assuring him there was a happy ending after every sorrow.

Today Tony had a stump instead of a hand, a dead super-spy assassin/assistant, and was still waiting for those prophesied end credits to roll.
Not a Walt Disney cartoon, this story, at least not one of those with the scrolled curly handwriting and the ‘And They Lived Happily Ever After’ bullshit. That was for cretinous nine-and-a-half year olds, who didn’t know better.

He gave the cuffs an experimental tug and noted the result. Pull equaled pain. He tried again, with more force. More pull equaled more pain. Tony could guess what a third attempt would render, but did it anyway, with heart.

It hurt like a bee eye tee see aitch! Pepper would not approve of the wording, and neither would his mother, bless her soul and her decaying corpse in the family crypt.

Natasha took it stoically. She didn’t even flinch at the string of expletives Tony unleashed.

Cap might have clubbed him in the mug, but his tear ducts were still in fine working order. He could feel the drops trickling across the lumpy bruise that was his cheek.

The cuffs didn’t budge though, not one inch, and there was no way he could wiggle his wrist out of them. He couldn’t break the pipe either; he wasn’t Captain America or the Hulk, and Iron Man was presently OUT OF ORDER.

Tony might still be alive (points for that), but he was doomed like Natasha whiling away in her oddball yoga pose, or like Rhodey, who was dead either because the boo men had gotten him, or because he’d run into the shutters Tony had triggered and then the boo men had gotten him.

Tony hoped it was the first option, that Rhodey had kicked the bucket before realizing that Tony had sold him out in order to save his own skin. If they ever met in the netherworld, Tony would make sure to mention that. ‘Four years do things to a man, pal, I just had to.’

Tony would never sink as low as shut a portal in someone’s face, of course. Someone, say, who needed, oh, thirty seconds to make it back through. He’d never do that. That was unfair and below the belt. Unsportsmanlike. But it wasn’t beneath him to trip his best friend up, if that meant the monster would grab his ankle, and not Tony’s.

He’d known for a while now that there was no such thing as a monster under the bed, of course. His ma had told him, ‘the only monster is your daddy when he’s out with his buddy Johnny, piccolino’, and Tony, a clever child even at the tender age of naively innocent, had understood what his mother wanted to say. He also knew that if he made sure to keep his foot under the covers, the thing under the bed would never be able to grab his ankle.

“Stop snickering,” he hissed at Natasha. The blood was bubbling out between her teeth, swell time that she was having. Well, she wasn’t the one chained to a pipe in the room she’d cut her own arm off. Easy for her to crack jokes about it. Tony imagined how her jaw would creak if she laughed.

Hardy-har-har.

God, how annoying.

He wrenched at the cuff again. His mouth contorted in a small ‘o’.

“Don’t you dare cry, boy,” said Howard in a stern voice and waggled his finger (he didn’t have numb blue grubs for digits), like he was talking to his little snot-nosed loin trophy. “Stark men are made of iron.”

Tony rolled his eyes. Well, his eye. Maybe the other one rolled too behind its swollen lid, but he couldn’t be sure. What he was sure about was that Howard was a crook (liar, liar, pants on fire!)
because Stark men were made of flesh and bone like every other goddamn human being, and nobody could tell Tony otherwise.

He hadn’t cut through 20-gauge steel when he’d lobbed off his arm, he’d cut through muscle and nerve and he’d cried like there was no tomorrow. Only there had been a tomorrow, and a day after, and after, and after. Everything that had followed had been one big, sickie mess, all the way till Jarvis had nudged him awake with a digital fake of the Pacific sun-up, and told him there was a malfunction on level 4F. ‘We’re still not home, sir, so just stop asking and make this easier on both of us.’

Tony pinched the sleeve of his shirt with his teeth. He pulled until he saw pale skin underneath. Where splint turned into arm, it did so with a purplish tinge. The ship’s gravity wasn’t comparable to Earth’s, but it still had enough weight to suck the blood out of his fingers.

Hesitantly, he touched his tongue to the inside of his forearm, about four inches above his elbow; familiar territory, only mirror-inverted. The skin tasted salty and bitter. He crunched dirt grains between his teeth. Dried blood too, but he wasn’t sure if it was his own, or Natasha’s. He’d had his hands (hand, singular, get it straight) elbow-deep in her chest at one point.

That was one horrendously intimate thought. Tony felt at once defiled. Cheating was Pepper’s cup of tea. He didn’t want to go home after putting a skewer through Captain America’s eye and have her point a manicured finger at him, accusing him of adultery.

He really didn’t think he could take that. Not from Pepper, who’d sucked dick ever since Tony’s thirty seconds had been over. That slut.

Would she take him back, he wondered?

Now Tony pinched at a skinfold instead of a sleeve-fold. It felt rubbery between his teeth, prickled a little when he bit down harder. There were marks when he pulled back. His chipped canine left a smaller indentation than the rest of his pearly whites.

It would be impossible to chomp off his arm if his toothypegs didn’t all perform at their peak. He could bin that idea right away. Right alongside Jarvis’ corpse chip.

His arm could consider itself lucky that he’d knocked out a piece of tooth three years in. With a wrench, nonetheless. He’d felt a little like Tom Hanks in Cast Away, only without a green screen and special effects. Tony’s pain had been real, not some Hollywood gimmick. The whole deal, the whole shebang.

He’d once read, in a magazine, that a fox had bitten off its leg after getting caught in a snare. That fox had really, really wanted to survive. A survivor’s type, just like Tony. Bet ya a bill fifty that the other foxes in the other snares hadn’t held a personal grudge against that savage little trooper for leaving them all in the lurch after it got the munchies for its own thigh.

Tony had thought little of the article at the time he’d read it (a couple years back, executives’ retreat, some tropical overpriced island paradisio, a Bloody Mary morning after Mary had given him a thrill-ride through the night). But he now understood the fox. He could pat the fox on the back and say confidently: ‘Buddy, I get you. Top notch decision making. Couldn’t have done it better, if I say so myself.’

A paw, or an arm, were not worth dying for. He could live without an arm. Without arms. He’d just tear out Steve’s throat with his chipped canine. He could do that.
What he couldn’t do was take a chow out of his own forearm right now. Too gross. *Ughh.* It didn’t stop him from salivating at the thought of a thick, juicy cut of Striploin, though. With melted garlic butter, and imported Himalayan salt flakes. His stomach made a flip.

Oh God, tempt him not.

“I didn’t want you with one hand, what makes you think you’ll stand a chance with none?” asked Pepper, all of a sudden.

Tony blinked. One moment he’d been alone in the Kremel tomb and now Pepper stood there, all heels and long legs that ended in her skimpy D&G dress. Tony looked across to Natasha. He gave her a *Can you believe this woman?* expression.

Tony couldn’t. Tony was speechless. He stared dumbly at the Pepper-thing.

“I have a hand,” he defended himself. He moved it. There it was. It barely tingled now, but it was there.

“You have grubs,” pointed out Natasha. What was it with her double dealing?! She was one slithery snake. Tony should have expected it. “You have grubby grubs for fingers. Fat little maggots. That’s not a hand.”

He frowned. This game could be played by two.

“That’s not a jaw.” Hardy-har-har. Miss Joker Face.

“You’re done,” said the Pepper-thing. “Time’s up. Tick tock.”


He began to claw at the cuffs, with his teeth and with his stump. In the med bay, in his head, the accusations kept piling on.

“Look at you, living like that, that’s not a life—”

“—you’re an animal—”

“—a rat!”

“—you’ll stop crying right now, boy—”

“Shut up, dad, nobody gives a flying fuck about you!”

“—think of the fox—”

“—the snare—”

“—bite, Tony, chew, swallow, attaboy—”

“—you gotta get outta here—”

“—go bash in Steve’s brains, Tony, punch him right back into the Arctic Sea—”

“Ahh!” yapped Tony. The manacles began to budge, but so did Bruce’s splint. Where was the haze, where was the darkness?! He needed Freddie’s *mamma mia, mamma mia!*
“—you sorry bastard—”

“—you’re a disgrace, son—”

“—KEEP CALM AND FOLLOW THE INCISION LINE, SIR—”

He squeezed his eyes shut.

“God, please, I want to go home, I want to go home, kill me or let me go home...”

The procession continued forever, with extra and overtime. When he opened his eye(s) again, after the standing ovations, everyone had bowed out.

He was alone again, only Natasha’s corpse for company.

Natasha stared at him from glazed over eyes. Rigor mortis had set in. The blood on the floor had congealed. She wasn’t more than a botched up steak now. If anyone asked Tony, the cook should be fired.

They had come, the lot of them — Avengers, wannabe friends — and sentenced him to death.

And then they’d left.

Cheerio. Toodaloo.

“You’ll never get out,” said Natasha with a sincerity that had eluded her while she’d still been alive.

“You can’t go home, Tony. Stay here, with me, and Jim, and Jarvis.”

He considered this. It made sense. Where else would he go? Any way the wind blew, like Freddie?

“You’ve bitten off all your limbs, Tony. What will you crawl away on? Your chipped canine?”

And he realized, with sickening certainty, that the time for the end screen had finally come.

Not Happily Ever After.

Game Over.
Despite their painfully slow progress it felt as though their silent little procession was over far too quickly.

Bruce wasn’t ready to step back through that door again.

The last few hours had brought reality crashing down on him. It seemed that the longer he went without an incident, the more he fell into that dangerous trap of fooling himself into believing he was human. He was, just with a prefix: in-human. He was a wolf in a sheep’s skin, a monster slipping into a Bruce Banner costume every morning before getting out of bed.

It was a sickness, a big suppuration waiting to burst. Thinking he could contain the infection was a delusion, and a costly one for everyone involved.

His right leg still had a drag to it, but it was becoming easier to bear weight. His back itched unbearably as his flesh knitted together at an expedited rate.

These were extraordinary circumstances. When he usually woke from his rampages, whatever damage the Hulk had sustained self-regulated itself during transformation. He would come to naked, but unscathed. Even that one time he’d deep throated a handgun had him completely intact after the Other Guy spat out the bullet.

This new turn of events was unexpected. And worrisome. Had he been bitten by something as well? Was there some airborne toxin that they’d all unknowingly inhaled, the entire time, and it now had secondary effects on his alter ego?

Steve and Rhodes were silent, polite almost. Bruce walked between them, trying to hide his indignity at having to be propped up while they staggered on through the carnage he’d single-handedly created. It was like revisiting a tableau of mindless violence that he couldn’t remember painting.

Then they arrived where it had all ended, and began anew, in one fluid transition.

Bruce wasn’t the only one who hesitated by the door of the med bay.

Steve hung back, not making eye contact with them.

War Machine whirred his head between the two, then Rhodes retracted the face mask and revealed a steamed expression.

“What? I’m smelling bad news here. Let the cat out of the bag.”

Bruce didn’t know what he expected. They were about to enter a tomb. There had been no good news since they’d boarded the damn ship.

“Look,” Steve said, and walked up to the door. “I didn’t have much of a choice. It is as it is.”

Confused, Bruce looked to the Colonel, who seemed equally in the dark.

Then Steve opened the door. It wasn’t locked.
Rhodes snorted, and pushed past them.

“Tones? Tony, are you— oh my fuck.”

The room looked as though it had been torn apart by a bomb. Equipment was bent and mangled, strewn across the furniture and floor. Every which way you looked was blood.

Bruce inhaled sharply. Natasha… Natasha lay in a twisted heap, eyes open and glassy, her limbs akimbo. She was in the far-off corner instead of on the gurney where he’d left her. Bile rose up in his throat. He choked, and turned away. The sight was too much to handle, knowing full well that he was responsible for it.

In turning, his eyes locked on the other tenant of the room.

Rhodes was already out the suit and crouched next to Tony by the time Bruce made the connection. No wonder Steve had been squeamish about the truth. Rhodes looked like he might tear him a new one, but then Tony stirred, and his priorities shifted.

“Tony, man. Come on. You with me?”

Tony’s head hung limply to the side, cradled against his arm. He was pretty out of it, cuffed by his right wrist to a metal beam. One lid was swollen to the size of a golf ball. There was bruising all over the left side of his face. Bruce knew, even through his myopic vision, that the size of the bruise was a perfect match to a certain super soldier’s palm.

Rhodes whipped around, his expression screaming murder. “What the fuck? What the actual fuck? Keys, now!”

Steve produced the latchkey from his holdall. He had the decency to look guilt-ridden.

Tony mumbled some incoherent mantra into the crook of his shoulder. He had yet to react to anything Rhodes said.

Bruce squinted, deciding that on his personal agenda number one was finding his glasses. He would be of much more help if he was actually able to see what was going on, instead of guessing by the severity of Rhodes’ language.

While Bruce was busy scanning the room — deliberately avoiding Natasha’s corner — Rhodes unfettered Tony. Without the overhead support of the cuffs Tony sagged forward like a potato sack. Rhodes caught him just in time before he hit the floor, face first.

The sudden movement jolted Tony back into awareness. He began to yell even before he opened his eyes. Rhodes put one hand on his shoulder, and the other over his mouth. Then Tony’s eyes jutted open, circling drunkenly in their sockets.

“Woah, dude— Hey. Hey! It’s me.”

That seemed to be of little importance to Tony. He set up and screamed again, trying to wrestle out of Rhodes’ grip. Bruce squinted in an effort to assess the damage. Where in the world were those damn glasses?

Tony managed to disentangle himself, and, realizing he was no longer chained, rose to all fours and launched into a frantic crawl towards the off-limits corner. His lungs gave a staccato concert, peaking every time he touched his broken arm to the floor.
He dragged himself all the way to where Natasha lay, and Bruce watched in a stunned sort of horror as he grabbed her by the jaw and forcefully snapped it closed.

“Are you going to shut the fuck up already, you filthy cunt!” Tony pitched.

He proceeded to desecrate the corpse, shouting obscenities with a clearly delusional desperation. Bruce was torn between concern at the state Tony was in, and the proprietary urge to pull him away from Natasha. He grabbed a nearby upturned table for support instead.

“Jesus Christ!” Steve said, and made a move towards Tony. Rhodes stopped him with a growl.

Bruce looked at Steve, trying to wrap his mind around what the Hell was going on, and what the Hell had happened since he transformed. “You chained him up?”

“I didn't mean for...” Steve let out a harsh breath. “You hulked out. It was an emergency. He'd have been a liability.”

“Guys!” Rhodes had Tony in some form of deadlock after managing to pry Natasha’s dislocated jaw from his fingers. Tony was hollering, putting up the fight of his life.

“Can you give him anything?” Rhodes asked, grunting as Tony sunk his teeth into the Colonel’s biceps. “Now would be good!”

“My bag,” Bruce said, snapping out of his own horror. He looked down at himself. “Also clothes. Glasses.” Nobody was listening.

“I’m not going in the attic-closet!” Tony roared. “You can’t make me!”

Steve rushed in to grab for Tony’s other side, and together they managed to pin him to the ground, where Tony’s shouting died down to a less voluminous blubbering.

“—outta the snare let me GO—”

Bruce picked up a pair of nicked spectacles, moving to wipe them clean on his shirt only to remember that he was, in fact, still naked. He pushed them up the bridge of his nose and saw the world in four dioptre prescription clarity. Locating his bag, he pulled out the spare clothes he’d packed at the bottom.

“Doc!” Steve was saying, trying to rearrange his grip on Tony without doing any more damage. Which really seemed like too little, too late at that point.

Bruce had one leg in a pair of sweatpants as he rummaged through what was left of his med kit, looking for something that would calm Tony down. A warning voice cautioned the uncharted dangers of mixing space narcotics with conventional sedatives, but clearly Tony was well on the way to doing himself more injury.

He drew an ampule of diamorphine into a syringe, one-handed as he struggled to pull his pants up with the other. Sinking a little too heavily onto one knee, Bruce grabbed a hold of Tony’s thigh and shoved the needle under his skin, pushing down on the plunger.

It took half an eternity for Tony to calm down, Rhodes and Steve sprawled on top of him as though they were trying to tap him out in a wrestling match. Bruce knew the win was theirs when Tony began to slur the recriminations rather than shout them, and gave up on trying to free himself from the lock grip. When they got off him, Tony lay spread-eagled on the floor, chest rising and falling in heavy pants. He shivered wildly, either from exertion, or pain, or both.
“Jesus, his arm,” Rhodes said, looking in horror at the splint, bloody and ripped, no doubt in one of Tony’s struggles to escape while they’d been gone.

There were bite marks in the forearm.

“I’ll never give up,” Tony garbled. “You hear me? Never.”

Rhodes smiled wanly, and propped Tony’s head on his pack. “I’d never expect you to. You’re a champ.”

“I’m a champ,” repeated Tony. He was very pale. He looked like he might throw up, if he could muster the energy. “I hurt real bad. And I’m cold.”

“It’s gonna pass in a minute. The doc gave you something. Against the pain. Ok?”

While Rhodes was doing the distraction, Steve helped Bruce gather whatever supplies were still salvageable. They both avoided Natasha’s corner. Steve kept glancing at Tony, suddenly swamped with stigma on what he’d done, and the damage it had wrought.

Bruce didn’t feel like giving him a pep talk. He knelt down next to Tony, and motioned for Rhodes to keep talking. The Colonel did, but also looped a restraining arm around Tony’s chest. Steve half-crouched over Tony’s legs. Between them they had him pretty well boxed up.

Bruce gave his face a cursory inspection first, but it seemed to be soft-tissue only. Thankfully, because maxillofacial surgery was on the myriad list of things that he was out of his depth with.

“What’re you doing there?” Tony wanted to know as Bruce relocated his attention to his arm. He tried to move his head to get a better view, but Rhodes blocked it with his body.

“He’s just taking a look at it,” Rhodes said. “Nothing’s happening.”

Bruce peeled back the bloody wrap of the splint, unable to shake the image of Natasha’s spritzing arteries from his head. He glanced past Steve, but caught himself in the nick of time before he got the whole picture. He’d only seen her boot. Nothing wrong with a boot.

Bruce swallowed down the lump in his throat. He was not going to start crying in front of everyone now. Tony needed to be fit for transport so they could get the Hell off this deathtrap. That was what mattered now. That was all that mattered. He took a deep breath.

The fracture, which he'd previously, optimistically, assessed as being stable, was now well and truly displaced. Tony’s right wrist no longer seemed to exist at all. His forearm was there, and his hand, and a jelly-like sack of flesh connected the two. All fingers were badly swollen.

“You can fix that, right?” Steve looked at Bruce rather than at Tony’s arm. What did he think? That having a medical degree meant there was a hidden magic wand Bruce carried around? If Steve hadn’t broken Tony’s arm in the first place, they wouldn’t even be in this situation. Natasha might still be alive.

“What’s going on? What are you doing to me?” asked Tony, a fearful hitch in his voice. He began to shiver harder, in anticipation of what might be coming.

“Nobody’s doing anything,” repeated Rhodes, but gave Bruce a ‘go ahead’ nod anyway. Bruce began to collect what he needed in terms of equipment, and briefly considered shooting more diamorphine into Tony before he started. He decided against it. Until they were back on the shuttle, he’d have to ration the supplies.
“I need you to hold him down,” he said. Morphine or not, it would hurt.

“Oh God. Oh God,” said Tony. “You’re cutting it off. You’re gonna cut it off, aren’t you?”

Rhodes made a slight choking noise, faint, and just for a moment in the back of his throat. “No. No, bud. The doc’s just checking it out. No cutting as long as I’m around. Promise.”

“I’m just resplinting it, Tony,” Bruce said.

Bruce had Steve pin him down at the elbow. Rhodes had a knee on his chest and was keeping his head turned away. Despite the opiate Tony began to hyperventilate.

“Hey— let me see what’s— what ‘r you— fuuuu—”

Bruce picked up the limb in order to assess the damage. Steve had to redouble his effort to keep Tony in place.


But he couldn’t look either, as Bruce tried to wrestle the bones back into something less deformed. Steve handed over the splint and they manipulated the arm into place, working in tandem while Tony groaned and grunted beneath them.

“God,” he yapped, and there were tears in his eyes. “God, stop! Please please no please—”

They twisted again, to get a better angle.

“ I swear to you I’ll be good I swear to God please give me a chance to — fuck oh shit oh— “

Something warm soaked through Bruce’s pants where he knelt. The acrid smell of urine pervaded the room. Tony let out a miserable gurgle.

They kept going.

Bruce taped the slim steel rod into place, two loops around the forearm, one around the palm. He followed up with compressed gauze, as tight as circulation allowed. When he was done, he was sweat soaked himself. Steve and Rhodes let go, and Tony rolled on his side, curled up on himself, and possibly passed out. He stopped wailing, anyway.

“For what it’s worth, I’m sorry,” said Cap awkwardly to the company at large. Perhaps he thought that awkward platitudes might go some way towards mending fences.

“For what it’s worth, I think you’d better zip it, Captain,” said Rhodes, making clear that he was less inclined to see it that way. Then he put a consolatory hand on Tony’s shoulder. “You holding up?”

An ambiguous moan was all he got in response.

But they couldn’t afford to make camp here. Rhodes had told them earlier that it was about an hour’s walk to the shuttle. They needed to cut their losses and get the Hell out of here. Steve began to collect their belongings.

“Let’s get you on your feet,” Rhodes coaxed, and pulled Tony up by the armpits. Tony looked like death warmed over. He glanced down at himself, at the new splint and the stain on his pants. Then he looked at Rhodes, and Bruce thought he might break out in tears right then and there.

“You can’t tell anyone,” he said, slurring his words.
“No. No, of course not. Tony, do you think you can walk? Do you want me to carry you?”

“I want to go home.”

Rhodes tried to smile. “Drive-thru on the way to Malibu? Five Guys?”

“Just home,” said Tony in a subdued voice.

Content enough with Tony’s borderline lucidity, Bruce began to rummage around for the rest of his spare clothes. He was freezing cold.

Steve looked concerned as he stiffly pulled a t-shirt over his head. The less charitable part of Bruce felt an irrational annoyance at this new-found solicitude Steve displayed towards everyone's wellbeing. It felt forced. Of course he wasn't ok. Nobody here was ok. Ok was a faint and distant memory. It felt as though everything was going to be divided now, forever, into a time before and after Natasha had stopped breathing.

He said out loud, “Yeah. Home sounds good.”

“Seriously, we need to get the fuck off this ship,” Rhodes added with a bitter enthusiasm, looking at his decidedly worse-for-wear suit. “Whatever let all the creepy-crawlies out disengaged the lockdown too, right? My navigation system is starting to fritz, but it looks like a straight line between here and the shuttle hangar.”

“It’ll be open,” said Tony. He was standing, albeit wobbly. “If the boo men got out, everything’s open between here and 4F.”

“Can we take the direct route?”

“Dunno. All players are on the field now, I guess. It’s Russian Roulette, either way.”

Bruce winced at the analogy. They all glanced over at Natasha, whom Steve had scooped up from her crumpled pose in the corner, and placed back on the stretcher. He was trying in vain to find something to cover her with. At least he’d turned her face away from them. Bruce wasn’t sure if he could bear to see her disfigured expression.

Tony staggered to the breaker box next to the exit.

“I’ll lock the door, ok? So they won’t feed on her.”

There was a loud sob. It took Bruce a moment to realize that it had come from his own throat.

“We're not leaving her,” he said in a strangled whisper. Nobody heard him. Rhodes was in the process of suiting up, and Cap was busy dislodging one of their packs from under the debris. Tony only looked dumbly on, lost in his morphine dream castle.

Bruce stood there, rooted to the spot.

“We're not leaving her,” he said again, and this time it was clearer, louder. There was an edge of hysteria to it. The Other Guy lapped at the opportunity to take advantage of a loss of control. Bruce swallowed hard, and tried to get his breathing in check.

Both Rhodes and Steve snapped at once to attention at the shift in Bruce’s voice.

“Look, doc, we’ll send someone—”
“I don’t care,” Bruce said. He couldn’t listen to any more of their excuses. He didn’t care what the rational, pragmatic thing to do was. He could not, physically could not, leave her in this place. He stood his ground. “She’s coming with us.”

“She’d have left you lying face down in the gutter,” said Tony solemnly. “And she’d have been right to do it, too. Most things ‘round here hunt by smell. It’s like swimming through a shark tank with a bucket of chum.”

Bruce gripped the edge of his bag harder. In the back of his head, a voice was telling him to shut up, to stop making a scene, to stop being so selfish. But he couldn’t help it, not now. “Then you can all fuck off. I am not. Leaving her. Behind.”

Rhodes had his hands up in a placatory gesture. “Ok. Just stay calm.”

“I’ll carry her myself,” Bruce insisted.

“You’re good,” said Steve, picking up on Rhodes’ wordless cue. “I’ll get her.”

He went and got her from the cot, heaving her over his shoulder. She came to lie in a very unnatural angle. It was horrible to watch. Bruce turned his eyes away as something popped, and Natasha sagged deeper into Steve’s grip.

Tony said, “We can always use the body for bait, if it comes down to it.”

Bruce stopped in his tracks, closed his eyes, and fought the urge to throw up. He would never be able to wipe that image from his mind now.

They left.

Rhodes took point, with Tony meandering in the middle in a sort of foggy haze, and Steve bringing up the rear with what was left of Natasha. Bruce kept his gaze straight ahead, blankly focused on one of War Machine’s sparking boots.

He thought that he should probably check on Tony, monitor his condition. That if he was a halfway decent person, that's what he'd be doing right now instead of wallowing in his own self pity.

But he couldn't bring himself to look back. There was nothing there but death.

Chapter End Notes

Welcome to chapter 21, med bay reunion, in which everyone is miserable, a corpse gets desecrated and Bruce finds a change of clothes, only to end up covered in Tony's piss, which basically might be an analogy for the entire mission at this point.

Thank you so much to everyone who's still reading and commenting. We don't have long left in the space part of our adventure and it's been really awesome sharing it with everyone.

And since we've come this far, let's take a look back at how this whole trainwreck got started in the first place.
APRIL 2016
THE TRISKELION

“MISSION BRIEFING”

FOUR YEARS AFTER THE CHITAURI WAR...

SO YOU'RE SAYING THERE'S PROOF OF LIFE AS FAR AS TWO YEARS BACK?

I'M WITH NAT: I SAY WE SIT THIS ONE OUT: TRY TO GET MORE INFORMATION:

CAN'T WE DO A REMOTE RECON? AUTOMATED SHUTTLE? WE'RE TALKING CHITAURI HERE.

DID I MENTION THE IMPORTANCE OF VITAL SIGNS?

I'LL PULL APART THE TRANSMISSION, SEE IF I CAN GET ANY MORE INTEL OUT OF IT BEFORE YOU GUYS LEAVE.

THERE'S NO NEED TO DISCUSS. A CHITAURI SHIP IN ORBIT, I AND EARTH'S MISSIONS DON'T MATCH.

Uh, Dr. Banner... you're tagging along.
Rhodey’s eyes kept darting uneasily to the power meter on the HUD. Eighteen percent now. Upper teens. One last joust, then it was either finding a charging station, or figuring out a way how to lug four-hundred pounds of scrap metal through an alien infested spaceship without attracting the attention of every killer germ on board.

On the upside, at least they had Tony back. Rhodey was still galled about the whole med bay intermezzo, unable to shake the mental image of his best friend being chained up like a dog.

But Rhodey wasn't an idiot either. It was obvious that Tony, in his current presentation, was trouble about to happen. Not that Steve was playing with a full deck after the spider-venom incident, but stopping Bruce's apocalyptic temper tantrum had been the imminent priority, regardless of how much Rhodey resented Cap for leaving Tony behind.

The handcuffing had been a low blow, but what would the alternatives have looked like? Lock the doors, hope he didn’t find a crawlway out, only to get himself chewed on by whatever lurked around the next corner? Take him along for the ride, and risk him getting smashed to a pulp by a rampaging Hulk?

The tactician in Rhodey pleaded the case in Steve’s favor, no matter how personally offended he was about it. That was the thing with missions like this. You'd look back on them, and rack your brains on a better what-if, a more preferable recourse.

Reality was different. Blink-of-the-eye decisions set into motion unstoppable chains of events. It was like tipping over the first stone in a world record attempt on Domino Day. Once started, there was nothing to do but buckle down and sit through the ride.

Sometimes the only choice left was which flavor of shit sundae you were grabbing a spoon for.

He thought about those Playstation, beer, and pizza weekends at Tony's place, when they'd stayed up for two days straight, binging through classics like Resident Evil and Dino Crisis. It was back in the day of dial-up, when Jarvis still fit on a desktop hard-drive, and Tony was yet to decide on which style of facial hair suited him best. They’d play by turns, switching between controller and printed walkthrough books. Rhodey would occasionally nod off when he was on directions, only to wake up to a bloodied ‘Try Again’ screen and a piece of pizza crust launched at his head.

Would there have been an alternative, better playthrough to this, he wondered? One where Natasha Romanov didn’t finish the mission slung over Cap’s shoulder like a duffel bag? Would they have been better off listening to Tony and camp out in Fort Stark, hoping, against the odds, for Fury to send backup? Should they have let Tony go and fix up the damage by himself, like he’d proposed? Maybe if the spider hadn’t gotten the hungries for Steve then Tony wouldn’t be walking around with a broken arm right now.

It would have probably started with Natasha not frying the systems. As far as Rhodey was concerned, that had been the first fated domino tile, the catalyst that had set a disastrous ripple effect into motion. But then again, if the alert hadn't gone off, Tony wouldn't have woken up. What would have been their chances of finding him, hidden away behind layers of steel doors in a far reaching corner of a ship the size of a city?
Rhodey shook his head. It wasn't like they had a save-file to reboot from, and find out the answer. In his heart of hearts the only thing that mattered was getting Tony home, and they were maybe a half hour away from reaching that goal. Natasha’s death was tragic, no question — but she’d come here, like all of them, knowing the risks involved in the mission.

Speaking of people who clearly did not share that philosophy, Rhodey glanced back at Bruce. He looked like, if offered the option of lying down and not getting back up again, he'd take it. Rhodey remembered one private, a guy who'd realised too late that a suicide bomber was strolling into a girl's school in Baghdad. He'd sported that same expression riding back to base after they’d dug out the corpses from the rubble. He blew his own brains out two weeks later.

Rhodey cleared his throat. Bruce looked up with a start.

“You did what you could back there, doc,” he said, the way he’d said it to that soldier in the Humvee down the dirt road. Natasha had been doomed the moment she’d followed Tony into that vent. If her death was on anyone’s conscience it was on Rhodey’s, who’d given the order. And he could live with it, because he knew he’d give that same order again, no hesitation.

“You weren't there,” Bruce countered, eyes red rimmed and bloodshot.

“No, I wasn’t,” Rhodey said. “But you were. You were with her in her last moments, regardless of how things played out. That matters. That she wasn’t alone.”

Bruce seemed to process this, almost indignantly, as though he was running through all the ways to tell Rhodey that he was wrong. Eventually, he just slumped his shoulders. Rhodey suspected that the poor bastard spent an unhealthy proportion of his time stewing over things he had no control over in the first place. He didn't envy Bruce's lot in life.

“Look.” Rhodey waved a hand. “You helped find Tony, so it's all good in my book. Let's just get him home now. It's time for closure.”

Bruce sighed, keeping his eyes on the ground. The conversation tapered out.

Rhodey gave a cursory check to where Tony stumbled along in silence. He had a slack, pliant expression on him, the dope watering down the discomfort he no doubt endured. Rhodey made another unpleasant linkup to their ego-shooter afternoons; Tony Stark, the real life version of an NPC zombie, wasn’t the glorified hero in this narrative.

He’d seen his friend at low tide when he’d picked him off a sand dune in Tali-land. What the media liked to call an ‘un-be-lievable comeback’ was a feeble allegory to the here and now. There was no telling how badly altered Tony would be from his martyrdom. Rhodey wasn’t sure if he could make a full rebound after a four-year stint in Hell. He’d seen hardened soldiers crumble from less than what Tony had gone through in that cave, and that had only been three months, and on Earth nonetheless.

It went like this: you'd be sitting in a bar with your buddies, all beers and smart mouth-offs, and someone would say ‘Whatever happened to so-and-so?’, and everyone would go quiet then, because the son of a bitch had gone out on the wrong end of his own service pistol, or beat the shit out of his wife and landed in prison, or switched the mess dress for a straight-jacket.

Rhodey couldn’t imagine watching his best friend play out the rest of his life licking windows in a psych ward.

No. Not an option. He'd have to walk Tony to the shuttle, nice and easy. Get him on board, have
Bruce sedate the shit out of him for the ride back home. They’d fix up the arm and the eye, get him a prosthesis for the stump, and then Rhodey would whisk him off to Pepper.

Between the two of them, they’d figure out how to pull Tony through the worst of it. She could hand off the company to some underling, and Rhodey would take a leave of absence from the military. They’d bow out of the public eye for a while, retreat to one of Tony’s many secluded estates, which Rhodey knew Pepper hadn’t had the heart to sell. Tony would have access to all the support and professional care that money could buy, and with Pepper and Rhodey by his side, they could guide him back into some form of normalcy.

It would be good, Rhodey told himself. They’d weather it together.

He thought about Pepper back on Earth, signing company mergers and the highlight contracts of the week, having no idea what was going on out of orbit.

It had been the right call, not telling her about their undertaking. He remembered sitting in the front room of Tony’s Malibu house, pleading with her to allow them to make it official, to have a reading of the damn will already. A year had passed and there was no sign of life. Rhodey was a realist; it was one thing to escape a terrorist cartel, and another to come back after flying through an inter-dimensional portal with a nuke on one’s shoulder.

He’d been annoyed with Bruce for going along with all that frequency scanning shit. It was unfair to get her hopes up for something that had been categorized by Jarvis as standing a chance bordering on impossible. He’d told her that it was time. She needed to move on. They all needed to move on.

And she’d been better for it, afterwards. Like a dam had burst. Accepting that Tony was dead, seeing his obituary in ink on paper had finally allowed her to begin processing her grief. It had been rough at first. Rhodey hadn’t been able to be the beacon of support she needed. The war had just ended, and the brass wanted him here, there, and everywhere. With Iron Man down and the Avengers concept scrapped, War Machine was forced to take on double duty.

But Pepper had pulled through in the end, poured her heartache into Tony’s legacy and the company. And if she still had the doc on the payroll playing sci-fi radio operator, then it was only a background thing.

So when Bruce came to Rhodey instead of Pepper, and told him about a could-be distress signal, he’d given him great credit for his decision.

At that point they were operating under the assumption that they’d only bring home a body, if they were lucky enough to find anything at all. It would have been cruel to infuse false optimism into Pepper.

Would they have found Tony earlier if he hadn’t convinced Pepper to put the search and rescue on the back burner? Rhodey felt a little like Cap must have in the med bay: faced with a shitty situation, calling a shitty decision, all under shitty circumstances. Hindsight was always 20/20.

“Holy Mary Mother of Christ I’m done with this cheapshit excuse of a rattletrap!”

Tony was wiping slime off his shoe. He’d staggered right into a goo-puddle. It sounded like he was stomping on a guinea pig with each step he took now. Tap-squeak-tap-squeak. Squeak-squeak.

Rhodey looked at the blob. Way too big for a rodent, unless the Chitauri had some form of Mutant Hamster Of Doom running around. Which, at this point, he wasn’t even finding too abstract a possibility.
“Looks like we’re not the only option on the menu today,” said Steve.

They had a reunion with the spider-spawn from the early parts of their trip. Several arachnopod bodies adorned the path. Rhodey suspected that Mom was not going to be happy.

“Was that… me?” Bruce’s self-reproach flared up.

No, the Hulk hadn’t come this way. Rhodey checked the flickering map to be on the safe side, but they hadn’t taken this route when they’d played tiggy with the doc’s second self.

“It’s battle royale,” said Tony, kicking at a severed appendage with his guinea pig trodding shoe. “It was like this before — before I locked them up. Big ones eat the small ones, small ones gang up on the big ones. Ever read The Hunger Games? It’s kinda like that, only in space. They made it into a movie, right? With that chick.”

“Jennifer Lawrence,” Rhodey supplemented. There were three sequels out by now.

“Bet you Can’t-Miss wouldn’t have lasted five minutes up here,” Tony said, and smiled dreamily to himself. The dope was making him spacey.

Rhodey attempted bringing things back to the present. “Can you tell what killed them?”

They were on the home stretch now, but he wasn’t about to let them trip over an obvious bump in the road so close to the finish line.


“I get it. Something we’d rather not meet.”

“Right on the money, Sherlock. But I think I know where we are now. Four turns, five maybe. Can I see the map?”

Rhodey projected it. It flitted, fluttered, and flared, and then frizzed out.

*Positioning system offline*, read the HUD.

“What a piece of shit software,” said Tony. He seemed to forget that he’d been the one to code it originally.

“Whatever. It’s this way. Come on.”

They were maybe ten minutes away from the shuttle bay when it happened. Tony was fantasizing aloud about something called shawarma. He wanted to try it when he got home. He proposed a get-together with a nonchalance as if Steve wasn’t shouldering the corpse of their fallen teammate. Bruce refused to commit to dinner plans.

Then they rounded the corner.

A good story always builds up to *the corner*. That’s where the climax of the action looms, the great big highlight of any third act — *around the corner*, like a street bandit packing a jammie in your face and screaming, ‘Gotcha!’

The moment they rounded the corner Rhodey’s world turned on its head. By the time he comprehended that something had latched on to his leg he was already in mid-air. By the time he realized what the Hell had grabbed him he collided with the wall. His face smacked hard against the
Unbraked impact, the armor reported.

He was hurled against the ceiling.

Critical damage to thermoregulation systems.

Head first on the ground.


It let go.

Tony appeared amidst a light show of warning LEDs.

“Get up, dammit, RUN!”

It took a moment to readjust his internal compass. What he thought was up was actually sideways, and he toppled over like a drunk.

“Move!” shrieked Tony.

Something else shrieked too, something that had previously wrapped a tentacle around Rhodey’s foot, and, after giving him the ride of his life, had suddenly let go. He looked up and saw only a blur of red and blue (mostly red) being chucked through the air. Then Tony pulled at War Machine’s heavy frame with his stump and his splint, and Rhodey stood, forcing himself to his feet. He ran.

A digital wrench lit up on the HUD. Service needed. Maximum mileage reached.

There was a crunch of bones, a spray of blood across the corridor. Natasha.

A split second later Steve was being ripped to shreds.

“Forget him!” Tony said. “Go, go!”

Leave No Man Behind, the Code of Conduct of the United States Armed Forces preached. Article II: I will never surrender of my own free will. If in command, I will never surrender the members of my command while they still have the means to resist.

Rhodey turned around and shut down all systems save for Combat.

“No no no!” screamed Tony. It was the sound of a kid who didn’t get his way, and was confused about the why.

The sound that Cap made when he hit the ground was merely a dull oompfh. He got up, but just to his hands and knees. That was as far as ‘up’ reached after a round in the centrifuge. He crawled over Natasha’s cast-off corpse on all fours.

“On your feet, sold—”

Whoosh! Round Two.

Attention! Grade 3 critical impact detected.

It had both an arm and a leg this time.
“Rhodey!” Tony screamed.

Floor. Wall. Ceiling.

The HUD went out. A crack of light peered through the cleft distending the face plate.

Rhodey thought of a mid-summer grill, Tony forking into a rack of ribs, slick with BBQ sauce. They’d laugh over lame jokes, a bottle of beer each. Tony would hold his with his new, custom-fitted prosthesis.

The inside of the helmet was covered in red and in chunks of skin that stuck to the dented metal surface.

He couldn’t think of BBQ sauce at all now. He thought only, oh please don’t let my mother see me after.

Then the something that held his arm and leg looped around his throat as well. He caught sight of Tony, briefly, and of Steve, who had pulled himself up, and maybe remembered the Code Of Conduct Of The United States Armed Forces too.

“Get them out,” Rhodey croaked, but it really only verbalized as a strangled hiss, and never made it past the hull of the helmet. The audio was down. He could scream all he wanted. They wouldn’t hear a syllable of it.

Steve and Bruce were trying to pull Tony away as Rhodey had another heavy date with the wall. And that bitch kept a tight-as-fuck throat lock on him through it all.

Run already, he wanted to say, but couldn’t as much as open his mouth. His tongue was thick and heavy. His eyes bulged, feeling like they might pop in their sockets.

“Rhodey!” Tony called again, and his voice was loud and clear over the noise of the indenting suit.

“AG,” Rhodey said, and then, “UG.”

The thing coiled tighter, regardless.

A goodbye kiss from the ceiling.

Another from the floor.

And the wall.

get on the shuttle go run outta here Tony don't let it be f
It was the most distasteful way of having a design flaw exposed.

The titanium coating of the gorget held up just fine. The rivets failed. When enough pressure was applied, they snapped like too tightly stretched treble strings. The plating easily collapsed in on itself then, like a blown over card house. He thought simply, *I’ll have to use a larger diameter next time.*

Everything else barely registered with Tony.

Then Rhodey was dead. The thing had ripped his head clean off his shoulders. *Two sizes up,* thought Tony. *Maybe even three.*

Hands slung around his chest. He was pulled back, floating almost, while Rhodely’s headless body jerked on the ground in a macabre posthum marionette dance.

“No,” said Tony, as though a single word could realign the course of events. “No!”

He cut free of their grip.

“You have to get out of here if you want to live, you idiot!” Cap said. Tony didn’t catch the exact wording, just that he didn’t give a rat’s ass about living if his best friend wouldn’t get to join in on the ride.

“You’ll die if you stay!” Bruce called after.

Then they were both gone from Tony’s focus.

He darted back for War Machine. He had a desperate flash of intuition to grab the severed helmet, to bolt it back into place, to make everything undone. But the helmet was lying too far away, and he didn’t have the right size rivets on him either.

Oh good God, Rhodey was dead!

“And? Are you gonna do anything about it?”

Tony looked past War Machine’s carcass, working his gaze over sleek polished oxfords, up an exquisite four-button jacket, all the way to the neatly rolled cigar bobbing in Obadiah’s mouth. Tony could almost smell the aged spice aroma of the stogie.

“Well?”

In the background the thing from an Eldritch nightmare gobbled up what was left of Natasha. He had maybe a minute or two before it would tire of *Tushonka* and come for him.

“I just wanted to sleep, Obie. I told Jarvis to stop waking me up. And now the bolts came undone! They didn’t service the suit right while I was gone.”

Obie took a long puff, like he always did when he brooded over how best to clean up Tony’s messes. Tony was mortified. He knew all too well what it meant to alienate his mentor.
But Obie was very composed when he spoke again, almost compassionate.

“You know there’s only one thing left to do at this point,” he said. “There is no margin for error now.”

Tony nodded. He was on his twenty-ninth second: he had to make the last one count.

He put his splinted hand over the fusion reactor bulging from the suit’s chest.


Locks clicked. War Machine popped open like a sardine can. Tony convinced himself that the body inside was not still twitching (it was). He heaved out the corpse, a heap of warm meat. In the distance the monster cracked Natasha like a cartoon watermelon. It made wet and squelching sounds as it gorged on her.


He placed his finger on the fingerprint scanner. The suit pinged.

_Fingerprints not recognized_, it read.

_Because they’re not fingers they’re dirty blue grubs is why_, he thought. He almost laughed.

Then he wiped his fingers on his shirt, and tried again. The suit pinged affirmative.

A compartment opened. He fished out the backup headset, and strapped it on. Thank God the ocular piece was fitted for the right eye. Tony only saw dark splotches with his left. The swelling had gotten worse instead of better.

He crawled inside the armor-coffin. Rhodey’s blood was still hot on the inner lining.


Immediately he felt a constriction in his chest, and the taste of coconut and metal on his tongue. He couldn’t last on two percent for a long time, but it would power the ACP just fine until he got things taken care of. And he definitely needed the suit juiced to the max for that.

Tony stood up. Most of War Machine’s left side was trashed. Several system failures blinked furiously for his attention on the backup headset. _Combat down. Flight down. Servo inconsistencies._

It didn’t matter. It would have to do.

He looked one last time over to where Obie stood. He wasn’t standing there anymore. Of course he couldn’t be standing in the middle of a Chitauri ghost ship. Not when Tony had put him in the ground years earlier with his own two hands (two being the catch-word here).

He pondered whether to go for War Machine’s helmet now that he had the suit. He wanted to see Rhodey’s face, just one more time, to make sure it had been Rhodey in that suit and not some apparition like a made-up Obadiah Stane. The part of eye he glimpsed through the crack in the helmet was not diagnostically conclusive. That could be anyone’s eye. That could be his own left eye, trapped not beneath a swollen lid, but behind a busted face plate.

The monster beat him to it.
You’re too late again, sucker! it didn’t say. Watch me face-rape your buddy, you three-legged dumb fox!

Tony closed the shutters.

He had work to do.

Rhodey would have to understand.

There was only one possible solution to this equation.

If he was brutally honest with himself, he had known what came after the equals sign the moment he’d heard Steve’s raspy voice over the transmission channel on that fateful New York afternoon.

“Close it! Natasha, you have to close it!”

“But he’s still out there!”

“He’s not making it back — shut the damn portal, now!”

He caught them up at the hangar bay.

There really was a shuttle.

Your ticket out of here, said a voice in whisper, the part of him that had hedged delusional beliefs since second thirty-one. Tony shut the lid on the goddamn little rabble rouser. There was no way out now but in a body bag.

“Found ya,” he said, and managed one big, lopsided grin.

He’d chug-a-lugged all the dope of War Machine’s MedAssist. He was stoned out of his gourd. He could play Beethoven’s Ninth on the piano now, one-handed, broken-handed. Or he could bash Captain America’s brains into a pulp. Either one worked.

He said, “Stevie, I think I ought to teach you some manners, old boy.”

How did that song go?

should have seen the end a’comin on, a’comin
die, die, die my darling
don’t cry to me, oh baby

Steve had cast him out, and Steve had pulled him from his final cycle, and this, this was on Steve too, even if Tony couldn’t quite connect the dots yet.

Perfect Steve Rogers, two-armed king of the castle.

The Red Queen yelled, “Off with his head!”

And there Rhodey’s went, rolling like a croquet ball.
“Tony.” Bruce, the pacifist. But even his voice was laced with angst, calm as he tried to keep it. “Tony, put down that... whatever that is. Just put it down, and come over here.”

‘That’ was War Machine’s electrified baton, a wicked toy outfitted by whomever the DoD had under contract nowadays. Tony had placed it in the right gauntlet palm, then blown the circuitry that controlled the finger joints.

His dumb grin stretched even wider. If it could, it would meet in the back of his head and tie a lover’s knot there. A shark’s grin, he thought, blood scented.

In a dim, dark crevice of his mind that the dope hadn’t reached yet, the same blasphemous voice told him that all he had to do was step on that shuttle ramp, and nobody else needed to die.

“You pile of shit. You waste,” said Tony instead. “I’ll stuff you with misery till it comes out of your eyes!”

“Tony. Jesus,” Steve said, blanched. “It wasn’t my fault. You know that. You have to know that.” But he raised his shield anyway.

How did the endgame go down?

In Tony’s head, a madly enthusiastic sportscaster narrated the event. Keith Jackson maybe, or Al Michaels, in an NBC special on the Tony Stark Super Bowl.

“I just cannot believe the atmosphere in here! The Chitauri Apocalypse Stadium is SOLD out to the very last seat!”

“We didn’t have that much viewer participation since the Stark kid bust ass back during playoffs against the Outer Space Patriots!”

“And look at him today! Nobody thought he had the sly-test chance of getting the ball rolling again after that hit he took earlier. But oh — oh, there! Geeez!”

“Man, that must have hurt! Can we get a replay on that? Let’s watch the replay!”

Steve’s shield was off to the side. Vibranium or not, 200mA worth of electrographic metal were hard to brush off. Steve’s fingers cooked from the voltage, and he was now exposed to Tony’s offense.

“It should have been you!” said Tony, and went to town with the baton. He had to lecture Steve on the essential rules of Stark Household.

Rule Number Fucking Only: Do not stand in Tony Stark’s way.

Steve parried, albeit at the cost of pocketing another shock. For a second he smelled like a burnt deep fryer. Then he brought his fists up in a boxer’s stance and swayed a little on his feet as he lied, “We don’t have to do this, Tony.”

“Dang, Al, those are some guts displayed by Team Rogers!”

“Some mighty fine Brooklyn gutter spirit right there, Keith!”
Steve landed a hook, snuck it in through Tony’s left side blind spot, and for a moment the world greyed out. Tony swayed, staggered, windmilled his arms for balance before the joints in War Machine locked tight, and he regained his footing.

Blood was seeping in rivulets down his face.

Tony put out his tongue, and licked the sweet stuff off his lips.

“I’m gonna do you in, Steve. If it’s the last thing I do, so help me God, but I’ll kill you.”

Five minutes or three hours later the stakes had turned in Tony’s favor.

Steve was on his knees, about to take it like the slut he was, with Tony standing over him ready to ram that baton all the way down Steve’s throat till it came out of Steve’s ass on the other side.

His headset was cracked. He was pretty sure his head was cracked. He heard very loud ringing in his left ear, angels’ trumpets maybe, or the bass guitar of a hellish AC/DC refrain.

His heart was trying to thrust the RT from its casing. The backup HUD read, *Ventricular tachycardia. Cardiac output affected.* He would go out to the taste of coconut and Cap’n USA burger patties. He’d go out with a bang - just like daddy!

“How’s that feel like, Steve, huh? *Huh?*” he asked shrilly, unmindful that his own words were nothing but a cluster of unintelligible grunts, the dope and the repeated head smacks turning his purposed redemption into savage frenzy.

Bruce was hanging off his right arm, straining War Machine’s hydraulics.

“Tony, for the love of all that’s holy, you have to *stop!*”

Steve’s jaw hung at a cross angle after Tony had whacked him full steam in the face with the teched-up prison shank. He was trembling and sweating and making very un-Captain-America-like noises. Some weird muffled squeak came out of him.

“Who’s the rat now, you fucking goblin?!” Tony wailed. Spit and blood flew from his own mouth.

“Who’s out of time now?!”

Steve struggled and flailed on hands and knees. Somehow he managed to right himself back up. He blubbered something with his busted mandible that could have been “Stop!” or “Die!” or “Tony Stark is a towelhead whore, and everyone knows!”

Tony reached back for the big swing anyway.

He reckoned he’d have a pretty solid lead on the final quarter if he scored this pitcher’s nightmare just right.

“I don’t think he can take that hit, folks.”

“It’s been a fan-tas-tic effort, but I’m afraid this is where it all ends.”

“This is the high-noon showdown. Only one man can walk away from it.”

“Hold your breaths — aaaaaand there it comes!”
“You think that’ll be enough to win me back, Tony?” asked Pepper. “You really think I’m impressed by *that*?”

“There are eight-hundred-forty-three days to go, sir. Would you like to hear the weather forecast for tomorrow?”

When Tony swung, something swung Tony’s feet out from under him. The cudgel clubbed Steve, but it failed to leave a dent in his frontal cortex, like Tony had intended it to.

Then Bruce lost his hold on Tony, and Tony lost his hold on the baton.

Something had slung around his ankle, and pulled.

“If I didn’t see it with my own two eyes, I would not believe it. When the heck did Team Lovecraft roll out onto the field?”

“I don’t know, Al, I really can’t say... but I think we’re in for a *real* kicker here!”

Was this how Rhodey had felt before he’d breathed his last?

*Attention: critical cardiac arrhythmia*, read the backup HUD before it flew off in high arc. Tony could not see where it landed. Somewhere off to his left. In the blackout zone.

He smacked hard against something, and there was an audible sound — *foomp!*

Not all the dope in the world could camouflage the jolt of pain that erupted in his core.

*foomp! again.*

He soared over Steve’s slack-jawed frame, straight into the E of the SHIELD branding on the shuttle’s fuselage.

*foomp! foomp!*

Sometime between his ribs and his sternum coming apart he managed to squawk, “Eject!” and came to lay in a heap on his back, with the RT jiggling loosely in what used to be his chest.

There was no coconut at all now, and no angels’ trumpets. There was only primal terror, and very, very much pain.

He saw faintly, through a grey haze curtain, two figures running up the shuttle ramp.

“Close it! Bruce, you have to close it!”

“But he’s still out there!”

“He’s not making it back — shut the damn plug door, *now!*”

No! Not again!
He flopped over on his belly.
He had no more than thirty seconds, tops.

“Oh! Oh, he’s trying to get up again!”
“I cannot be-leeve this guy’s tenacity!”
“Mark this moment! This is going down in the history books, folks! This right here!”
“Un-be-fucking-liev-able!”
“Keith, are you seeing this?! Is this even for real?!”
“Yes, I’m seeing it, A! I’m seeing it!”
“Holy smokes, that poor dude’s tryna crawl outta there ON HIS TEETH!!!”

Chapter End Notes

If you thought that Tony was going to take Rhodey’s death with stoicism and grace, you clearly came to the wrong fic.

Here's how things went from Tony's perspective.

Will Tony make it to the shuttle? How screwed is Steve? Will Bruce just decide 'fuck it' and abandon both of them to their tentacled fate? How much of what you just read really went down the way Tony's telling?

Find out next week, gentle reader.
James Rhodes was dead in the kind of way that made it obsolete to examine the body. His head was lying ten feet away from his shoulders.

The slaughter was over so fast that Bruce barely had time to notice Steve dropping Natasha. Tony’s earlier ill-omened prediction became bitter reality. The only reason the three of them were still alive was because the monster couldn’t decide whom to polish off first: Black Widow, or War Machine.

Then Steve was dragging them, Bruce on one side, Tony on the other. Tony was the first to shake free of his spell. By the time Bruce regained his own wits, Tony had already cut himself loose from Steve’s grip, and was darting like a madman back into Death’s open arms.

They both called after him, but he wouldn’t or couldn’t hear them. The last look Bruce glimpsed of him was Tony bending over War Machine’s headless frame.

“We need to go back!” he said. Already two of their party had died for a ghost man; he wasn’t returning to Earth with empty hands, and three lives to answer for.

“We need to prep the shuttle first,” insisted Steve. He had a heavy limp. “If we’re attacked, if you turn green, I don’t think I’m in good enough shape to stop you. We get the shuttle airworthy. Then I’m going back for them.”

It was not discernible whether he meant going back for two corpses, or for three.

Ten minutes later, with half the numbers of the six-digit code punched into the numpad on the shuttle trunk, Tony made his grand return.

He was wearing the battered War Machine armor sans helmet, holding what looked like a high-tech baseball bat in one hand. Bruce had never before seen the kind of expression that Tony sported in that moment. He knew, before Tony even opened his mouth, that this was not a man currently in touch with reality.

Then Tony did open his mouth, and what came out of it cost them most needed reaction time.

Before they could even think of a way to placate him Tony barreled into Steve like a cannonball. It took less than a minute for Steve’s head to resemble mashed strawberry pulp rather than the white-teeth beam of his ‘We need YOU!’ World War II posters.

It became instantly clear that Tony wasn’t seeing this as a donnybrook between two rivals — he was hellbent on beating the life out of Steve.

Steve got a few hits of his own in, but Tony was too pumped on adrenaline, grief, and whatever pharmacological cocktail was running through his system. He barely registered the disastrous blows he took.

Bruce tried to intervene, but there was little he could do to quell a fight between a cybernetically enhanced armored psychotic and a banged up super-serum soldier. He attempted staying Tony’s hand by physically hanging off his arm, but War Machine’s hydraulics sent him sprawling into the far corner, while Tony continued to zone in on his murderous pursuit.
Bruce got to his feet and gave it a second shot, grimly aware that Steve wasn’t going to be able to take the rap much longer, serum or not. He launched himself again at War Machine, with Tony whooping and hollering in progressively irrational fashion. But a scrawny five foot seven physicist was no match for a robotic suit, even on a good day. Which this really wasn’t.

Steve raised his hand above his head to shield himself from a fatal blow. He yelled, and Bruce realized it wasn’t meant in a ‘final words’ manner, but rather as a warning of a much bigger, much deadlier threat.

Rhodes’ executioner had followed them, set to bring to a close what it had started.

It lifted Tony clean off his feet and encircled his torso in tentacles, squeezing at War Machine’s already wrecked metal casing. Tony gave off a row of ear-splitting guttural shrieks as the thing pelleted him across the hangar.

God, was this how it was all going to end?

Bruce shut his eyes. He thought of Nat.

Something flashed past him. Steve was hoisting his shield, somehow back on his feet, his jaw set in a grim, crooked line.

“Shu-uhh!” he choked out with a thick tongue, and launched himself at the beast. Tony was on the ground. He had somehow managed to extricate himself from his suit, and was now lying, spasming, a ways from the shuttle.

Bruce shook himself out of his shock. He grabbed Steve, who was nearest, and made a sprint for the craft, taking advantage of the short recess made possible by the monster taking uncanny delight in ripping War Machine’s sparking guts from its steel frame.

They reached the ramp. Bruce darted up, while Steve darted past, back out towards Tony.

Bruce stormed into the cockpit, punching at buttons in bulk, willing the shuttle to hurry the fuck up with preflight checks. On a surveillance monitor he watched the backside of the craft, where Steve had made it over to Tony. He grabbed Tony by the collar and began to drag him back. Tony squirmed, and even on the pixelated screen Bruce saw how parts of him stood out at very wrong angles.

*thump!*

Something impacted with the shuttle windshield. Bruce toppled over backwards with a start. Part of War Machine’s torso dangled off the outer dashboard.

His stomach clenched as he watched the amorphous nightmare take up pursuit on Steve and Tony, who were making pitifully slow progress toward the ramp.

*ALL SYSTEMS GO*, the control panel read.

He clamped his hands around the gear stick. Steve and Tony were out of view now, having moved past the camera’s eye.

“Please, please, please,” he said out loud, waiting with baited breath for the sound of boots on ramp. The creature was ever approaching.

Then he saw them on the on-board camera. Steve was punching at ramp controls, and gesticulated
wildly into the video feed.

Bruce wasn’t exactly a trained pilot, but neither was he an imbecile. He put the shuttle into gear just as angry blows began to thump against the hull. Steve appeared, sunk into the co-pilot’s seat, and flipped all the switches Bruce hadn’t gotten right. He floored the accelerator, and they swerved out of the hangar bay with all the finesse of a seventeen year old learning to parallel park for the first time.

Then they were out, and the inky blackness of space enveloped them like a shroud.

They saw to Tony first. Scraps of undersuit were still attached in places, exposed wires sparking their death throes. They pried it off him in sheets, as though Tony was a prawn in a shell. Bruce thought of Chitauri exoskeletons. It felt like aeons ago.

Tony was in very bad shape. He could not articulate his own injuries, reduced to a language of mewls and squeaks. His pupils were pinpoint; Bruce suspected he’d availed himself of whatever emergency drug delivery system War Machine had to offer before abandoning the bulk of the suit to the monster.

And that was good so. Tony, along with the rags of metal they pulled off him, were covered in a deep, saturated red. It was impossible to tell how much of the blood belonged to Tony, and how much came from the injuries sustained by the suit’s previous occupant. Bruce had seen worse, but only marginally, and most of it had been in the last forty-eight hours. Tony’s chest was concave in places. Around the arc reactor it dented inward like a tin foil pie plate. By some divine miracle his breathing lacked the tell-tale gurgle of a punctured lung.

Carefully they carried him into the med bay.

Bruce sedated him first, put him on a breather, then hooked him to life support and diagnostics. As the monitors came online he felt instantly alleviated. This would not be Natasha all over again, he promised himself. This time he would save a life.

He began to take inventory of the damage. Multiple fractures: orbit, radius, ulna, sternum, costae, pelvis. Cardiac irregularities. Increased intracranial pressure. No major ruptures that he could ascertain, but soft tissue swelling was extensive. Assorted superficial lacerations. Severe bruising. Moderate blood loss. He classified Tony as a Two (Emergent) on the ESI and forwarded a preliminary report to HQ. They had better prepare for the laundry list of surgeries that Tony required. An operating room was the first thing he would see upon his return to Earth.

He set drug dispatch to ‘high’ and took one of the beepers. Tony would be stable in the care of SHIELD’s AmbuWatch for now, he decided. The pager would ping him in the event of complications.

Bruce went to search for Steve.

He found Captain America hunched over the communications relay in the cockpit.

“Deez eez stee oges, stee-wen oges, u kopee me?”

“Negative, no copy, please repeat,” someone was saying. Another voice added, “Get me the tech expert in, we’ve got a bugged transmission here!”

Bruce was pretty sure that the issue wasn’t blamable on connectivity. He suspected it was rather due to the obvious step deformities in Steve’s mandible, and the classic anterior open bite look of
someone with a pulverized jaw.

He took the mic out of Steve’s hand.

“This is Bruce Banner,” he spoke into the transmitter. “Identification code alpha-niner-niner-zero. Can you hear me?”

“Dr Banner?” Surprise and relief on the other end of the line. “We got you loud and crisp, doc. Status report! What’s happening up there? You were off the grid forever.”

Bruce glanced at Steve, who was dribbling saliva from one corner of his mouth. Tony had done a formidable job of reshuffling his face.

He decided to keep to a bare-bones summary of the story.

“We’re on our way home. Requesting emergency medical assistance upon landing.” He took a deep breath. It was hard to find the words. “Two fatal casualties,” he said. “One member critically wounded, one moderate. Quarantine measures advised.”

In the background someone hissed, “Get Director Fury on the line ASAP! This is no drill,” and then back into the speaker, clearer, “Dr Banner, please identify subjects by name.”

Steve looked at Bruce. Bruce stared at an imaginary focal point somewhere over Steve’s shoulder. His heart made a leap from erratic to flat line. Steve put a hand on his shoulder. Bruce choked on the next words anyway.


Incredulous murmur, then silence, then, “Please repeat that.”

Bruce repeated. His voice was barely a whisper by the time he finished.

The answer was dispirited. “Copy,” it said, and, “Necessary procedures initiated.”

Steve had produced a pen from somewhere, and scribbled vigorously on his own (bloody) palm. He held it up to Bruce, who relayed the message to HQ.

“Requesting remote control of spacecraft,” he said, and thought of Rhodes, who was supposed to sit behind the steering wheel now, and of Natasha, who should be conducting sit-rep with home base instead of being defiled by some come-alive alien incubus. Then he added in a spasm of desperation, “I don’t know how to land this thing on my own.”

More static crackled on the other side. Finally: “We can take over as soon as you hit orbit, Dr Banner. Don’t worry, we have it covered.”

“Ok,” said Bruce, and flipped the comms switch. He couldn’t find the strength to care about proper transmission etiquette. They’d figure out how many fucks he gave even without the generic ‘over and out’ and ‘talk to you soon’ niceties.

Then he looked at Steve, who leaned heavily against the cubicle, exhausted by the near-death experience.

“You know, for a moment there,” he admitted. “I almost wanted it to get us, too.”
The way home was eternal. On Bruce’s medical recommendation Steve acquiesced to a serum appropriate pain management. The spider wound had advanced in infection, but was not life-threatening. Bruce took samples for a later audit under the microscope. There was not a lot he could do about the jaw; it would have to be reset, probably osteotomized, once they touched down.

They agreed without dissent that, for safety reasons, it would be better if Steve spent the rest of the journey in the isolation cell, in case he ran a second head trip through the Normandy.

Bruce fixed him up with an IV and barbiturates, and locked the door.

Propped up in the shuttle's med bay, watching the rise and fall of Tony's dented chest with an almost obsessive paranoia, Bruce had plenty of time for self recriminations.

He let it all play out in his head. Not just Natasha, although she was the headliner of this nightmare story. He thought of Steve and the poison, and his own inability to construe the signs. He thought of Tony’s spiraling mental state, and how he should have intervened sooner. He thought of cracking ribs and the rhythm of ventilatory assistance, and his utter failure as the team’s medic.

To top it off he’d made himself into an active danger. It had been his transformation that had set off the chain of events leading to Rhodes’ death, and everything that had followed after.

And it still wasn’t over; if he really put in an effort he would end up with Tony’s life on his conscience, too. So began Bruce’s compulsive need to check the medical equipment on an hourly basis. Every time the apparatus gave an off-beat bleep his own heart rate spiked at unhealthful levels. Despite AmbuWatch Tony had two respiratory arrests before they entered Earth's atmosphere.

When Bruce wasn't watching over Tony, he paced in front of the isolation cell and looked through the tiny slot in the hatch door. Steve lay on the cot, back turned. He didn’t move once. If not for the shallow ins and outs of his thorax he might as well have been dead. If the inflammation reached the mouth base, Bruce thought, if it obstructed the windpipe…

That would be four bodies he’d have to sign the obits for, then. Four more on his tally sheet.

When the hatch door finally opened and hazmat suits swarmed inside, Bruce had gone an unreasonable length of time without sleep. He barely even registered that they'd landed.

They carried Tony and Steve off on stretchers. Tony was barely recognizable by that point, too much swelling, too much bruising. The EMTs rushed him through the security barriers, and then he was gone. A surge of relief flooded Bruce.

If Tony died now, at least he wouldn’t do it on Bruce’s conscience.

He tried to give a handover, to run them through a list of Steve’s and Tony's injuries, but he felt suddenly unstable on his legs. There were too many people and too many questions, and a body that had abruptly run out of reserves. A set of arms lowered him down against the wall. A paper cup with water appeared, and someone pressed it into his shaking hands.

“Drink,” came the order, but he couldn’t. This was followed by a check on pupil reflexes, a prick in the arm, and a too-close-to-his-ear shout of, “We need a dooly over here!”

The last thing he remembered before the heaviness dragged him under was a black leather trench coat bending over him, and his own voice admitting in whisper:

“...it was me... they're dead, and it's my fault.”
Well, it's been a long ride, but our heroes finally made it back to Earth.

We're out of space, but not quite done with our boys yet, so stick with us for all the fun of the aftermath of what was arguably Nick Fury's worst mission call in history. (And have fun with the updated summary.)
Chapter 25

After Manhattan he woke up in a hospital bed. Natasha Romanoff sat by his bedside, propped up on her elbow against the armrest. There was grime in her hair and blood on her face.

He asked the only important question.

“Did I hurt anyone?”

She put a hand on his arm, and tried to smile.

“You did good,” she said, but the pick-me-up faltered. The corners of her mouth dropped. “But they’re still out there. It’s carnage. We need you on your feet fast.”

Normal human physiology didn't allow for tissue distension and contraction at the rate the other guy required. The nausea was bad, the memory gaps worse, the headaches and crushing fatigue taking the last out of him.

Worst were the remnants of anger, little echoes of rage, intrusive thoughts that would pop into his mind at the worst times. Like when Natasha came with yogurt and a plastic spoon, and all he could think of was how easy it would be to rip both her arms off her trunk.

It wasn't him, he reminded himself. But it was still hard to sleep.

He met Virginia Potts while hospitalized, in the second week of six long months to come. Pepper, as she introduced herself, looked like she’d been crying for most of that time. She was Tony Stark’s girlfriend, and Bruce offered empty condolences.

Erik Selvig hadn’t made it out alive and Bruce was the next best expert they had on portal physics. Pepper, and by extension Stark Industries, were offering their collaboration and resources. The portal site, albeit closed now for weeks, was still emitting trace amounts of gamma radiation.

“Could you find out where he went?” she asked, her voice hitching in her throat.

“Theoretically,” he said, but refrained from pointing out that there was no way Tony Stark had survived that long in the dead of space.

“Could you bring him back?”

Probably not, he thought, but she was crying again, and he found it hard to say no. So he offered to try.

Natasha came to Stark Tower the next time. Her mouth was a grim line but her eyes were shining with adrenaline.

“We need the big guy,” she said.

“It was only supposed to be a one time thing,” he said. He'd spent years trying to avoid being made
into a weapon.

“People keep dying,” Natasha said. Don’t let it be on your conscience, was the underlying message.

Bruce looked up.

He let SHIELD drop him into the middle of a hot zone the very next day.

The more he transformed, the worse it became. He burnt the candle on both ends. He said ‘yes’ when they offered him the lit match, and ‘thank you’ when they scooped him up after, like a spent firework. Bruce was nothing if not dutiful.

Through it all, Natasha was there. Sometimes she sat in a chair by his bed, sometimes she held a cardboard bowl while he threw up the remnants whatever the Other Guy had eaten alive in his rage. Other times still it was just a pat on the shoulder upon discharge, telling him he’d done a good job.

A good job that he would never remember. Because it wasn't him. The only one who wanted Bruce Banner was Pepper, and even that was only a means to an end. But they both made him feel like maybe he was doing something right. That he was needed.

He took a shower and pretended that he couldn't see clumps of hair falling out in fistfuls, clogging the drain.

Captain America, in charge of infantry, led squadron after squadron into battle. Often he was the only one to return, caked in soot and blood and the guilt of his own immortality. He brought home his men’s dog tags like morbid conciliation gifts.

The Chitauri broke through as far as the West Coast. Air defense was taking heavy hits. War Machine was down. Colonel Rhodes, the only one the suit was biometrically coded to, was unfit to fly after a chance encounter with one of the remaining Leviathans.

SHIELD needed a miracle, and they thought its color was green.

He’d fallen asleep at his desk.

At the edges of cognizance Natasha and Pepper were arguing. They had to deploy him, claimed Natasha. No, he was wrecked, argued Pepper. He was just working too hard, too many hours wasted on analyzing the portal site. No, it was the combat missions. They went back and forth.

It occurred to Bruce that Pepper never requested that he stop for a breath from looking for Tony, nor did Natasha ever suggest that he take a sabbatical from all the Code Greens.

He wiped at his nose. There was blood on the back of his hand, little red splatters across the bones of his wrist. Both women sounded like they were underwater.

“What do you need?” he asked, not sure which of them he was talking to.

It was a disaster.

He’d landed and he'd looked up at the invading hordes and he'd poked and prodded at the thing that he kept locked inside and waited for the pain to come washing over him.
The Other Guy didn’t show.

It was Steve Rogers who’d grabbed him before he hit the ground.

Later he woke to Natasha, the dull quake of bombs in the distance, and a makeshift bunker.

“We thought we lost you,” she said. “What happened out there?”

He could barely speak.

There was a cure for the Other Guy after all. Bruce felt elated in his fatigue. This was the absolution he was looking for. This was what wiping the red from his ledger looked like.

“Bruce,” said Natasha. “We’re losing.” She put one hand on top of his. Warmth spread through him. “They’ll reach LA within the week. We can’t stop them. Not without you.”

He didn’t know what to tell her. That he couldn’t? Wasn’t that blatantly obvious from his current state? Unsustainable gamma levels up against human weakness. His body wouldn’t take another transformation.

“A lot of people will die,” said Natasha. There was no reproach in her tone. She was stating a fact.

“What can I do?” he asked, because there wasn’t anything he could do. It felt so freeing to know that the matter was out of his hands.

“We can give you something,” she told him. “Something that will make you angry.”

Even through the haze of exhaustion his stomach dropped.

But she looked so pretty. And people were dying.

She pulled out a syringe and he rolled up his sleeve obediently.

He didn’t wake in a hospital bed then. He woke up in a cell. There were padded cuffs, and a line snaking from the crook of his elbow into a pump holding enough pentobarbital to down a monster.

Natasha wasn’t there, but he asked the question anyway.

“Did I hurt anyone?”

The silence was a vague affirmation. In the end it was the beep of the machine, the subsequent surge of liquid feeding into his vein, and the onrushing darkness that confirmed it.

Objectively, the Other Guy had helped turn the tide of the war. That was probably the sole reason why he’d been allowed to wake up at all, let alone return to Stark Tower; he suspected Pepper and her host of lawyers had helped in that regard. Despite the Chitauri menace now banned Pepper still believed in finding a way to track the Manhattan portal, and was desperate enough to call on a killer gamma freak for help.

He never got an exact figure on how much collateral damage he’d caused, or how long he’d been rampaging for before they’d taken him down. There was a seven week hole in his life, but he could not separate how much of that had been the Other Guy, and how long he was under the influence of narcotics. Later he would attempt to research the death toll linked to the Hulk, but there had been a war going on, and the numbers were skewed. Even Jarvis could not, or would not help.
Natasha disappeared. He didn’t hear a word for nearly a year, when she would abruptly turn up out of the blue to invite him to coffee and awkward stilted conversation.

They attended Tony Stark’s funeral together.

Nobody ever asked him to do a Code Green again.

When Bruce woke this time it was not in a hospital bed, and it was not 2012, and there were no manacles this time, either.

His glasses were folded neatly by the bedside table. A glass of water and a large metal bowl stood next to them. He put on the specs and looked around.

The room was far, far too large to be standard SHIELD accommodation. It dwarfed the bed which was bolted to the floor. A glass wall faced out into a blank concrete cubicle holding a single chair. No windows to the outside. The walls were high, whitewashed, thick. He didn’t need to check the door to know it was locked.

Bruce supposed he should be flattered that SHIELD had gone through the trouble of building a containment room in advance, but it didn’t change the fact that he’d woken up in a cage.

He drank some water. He folded his legs underneath him. He stared at the wall and tried, unsuccessfully, not to think of Natasha.

They called Fury down within the hour.

He appeared in goose-step, perching in the armchair outside the glass panel. In his hand was a remote, and he pressed a button. He could hear him sighing through the speakers. Fury rubbed a finger against his chin, and that one eye pored over Bruce for a long time before he spoke.

When he did it was in the voice of a man scoping out a crime scene, questioning a suspect.

“Start at the beginning, Dr Banner,” Fury said. “But be careful what you say. Captain Rogers isn’t in shape to back up or denounce your claims, and that in itself is a huge cause for concern.”

Bruce tried to get a read on Fury, some kind of tell. He squinted past a leather shoulder pad, willing Steve to come strolling round the corner and straighten the whole thing out.

“We found Tony,” he said, because that seemed like as good a point as any to found his alibi on. It was hard to formulate an adequate summary appropriate of the nightmare they’d just lived through. He found himself opening and closing his mouth, uncertain of which words might get him out of there, and which were bound to make SHIELD throw away the key.

Fury waited.

"Steve and Tony,” Bruce said, taking a mental shortcut from start to finish line. “They’re all right?”

“As rosy-cheeked as two friars in a mead cellar,” affirmed Fury.

He didn’t stare now, he glowered.

“Cards on the table, doc,” Fury said. “Up there. What happened?”

“We located the ship,” Bruce said. He began to narrate in staccato precis. “Steve. He got bit by something. He’s not himself. And Tony...”
Bruce was about to give the rundown on Tony when Fury huffed, squinting. “We found trace amounts of hallucinogens in all of your bloods. Yours included.”

“Wait. What?”

Hallucinogens made sense for Steve, who’d been poisoned, and for Tony, who’d spent four years becoming a space-junkie. But how had Bruce ended up with mind altering substances in his blood? Had there been something airborne?

He’d never wanted to see Steve more than in that moment, if only to back up his own recollection of events.

“…and you show elevated irradiation levels too, so we know you’ve turned,” said Fury. “Did the Hulk squeeze Stark’s chest like a Squishy stress ball? Start filling in the gaps for me, doc, before I reach my own conclusions. Those might not be very favorable for you.”

Suddenly hallucinogens seemed like the least of his worries.

“You don’t think that I— that the Other Guy— that he… did this?”

Bruce hesitated, because he didn’t want to drop Tony in it, but at the same time, Steve was bound to give an account of what had happened eventually, and it would be better if everything lined up.

He looked at Fury.

Had Tony really beat the shit out of Steve though?

An amputee with a broken arm and a broken suit getting one over on a super-soldier?

How plausible was that?

And if he couldn't rely on that memory, what other memories couldn’t he trust? Had Natasha’s death gone down the way he thought it had, or was that just a suggestible mind desperately filling in the blanks because he couldn’t face what the other guy had done?

“But Tony and Steve,” he offered helplessly.

Fury raised his hands. “Whoa there, cowboy. You’re saying Captain America got his ass lit up by Tony Stark?” He pointed over his shoulder. “That Tony Stark? Cause if you told me it was the other way round, that Steve Rogers wiped the floor with Lost In Space, well, I’d be more inclined to give it a second thought.”

Fury laughed, but it was humorless. “Had to buy out the local hardware store to get enough plates and screws to bolt Stark back together, and he’s still far from over the hump. A man in that condition doesn’t hand Captain America a coupon for a complimentary braces treatment, Dr Banner.”

“But Tony had War Machine,” Bruce protested, well aware that his alibi was sounding less and less plausible by the minute. Here and now, sitting in this whitewashed room with Director Fury glaring at him like he was insisting that the sun rose in the west, the whole thing seemed like a fever dream rather than anything rooted in reality.

“There was a huge creature, like a… a giant squid. It decapitated Rhod—”

“Mhmm,” interrupted Fury. “Giant squid. I’ll add that to the list of suspects. You want me to put E.T. on there as well?”
Bruce shook his head. If he closed his eyes he could picture it all. James Rhodes' head bouncing along the corridor, dribbling blood like a leaky ale tap, the look on Tony's face as he burst into the hangar bay ready to end it for all of them, the sounds he’d made when that creature had begun to pop him like a log.

It was so clear.

But if his blood was full of hallucinogens and there was nobody to corroborate his claims, then how could he say for certain? He wasn't in robust psychiatric health himself. Could just the right mixture of alien trip-tonic and stress have tipped him over the edge?

He carried on, less certain. “Tony took the suit. After Rhodes was dead. Him and Steve fought in the shuttle hangar. The squi— the monster returned. That's how Tony got the worst of his injuries.”

“And Romanoff? Stark take her behind the woodshed too? Captain Rogers team up with the backyard boogie to get one better on Rhodes? Since when are you a pro at the blame game, doc?

Bruce took several deep breaths as the monitor on his wrist signaled his rising disquiet. Fury put words in his mouth as though he was set on making Bruce the scapegoat for what had been a catastrophic wreck of a mission.

“If you don’t believe me, you’ll have to wait for Steve to wake up. He’ll confirm it.”

Unless he wouldn't.

“That the Third Reich has fallen?” said Fury, snorting. “I don’t doubt that.”

“You don’t—”

“Oh, but I do, Dr Banner.” Fury rose from his chair, mock-dusting off his pants. Apparently he’d heard what he needed to hear to make up his mind. “Think it goes without saying that you’ll enjoy full board and service for now.”

He wanted to protest, that they couldn't leave him here, that he was telling the truth. But the words died in his throat, and he considered his situation as he sat back on the mattress, watching Fury leave.

He forced himself to apply some measure of objectivity to the picture. The only two concrete facts he had to go by were that there was a mind-altering substance in his blood sample, and that the same blood sample indicated a recent gamma spike.

Everything else existed in his head, unsubstantiated.

Loser.

Chapter End Notes

Well, this is definitely not ranking in Bruce's top 10 best days ever...

A little more insight into what things were like after the Battle of Manhattan.
Thank you so much, as ever, to everyone who’s sticking with us and commenting and getting involved. Especially thanks to the awesome Skedoodle, who made this epic fanart of Rhodey’s death. We love it so much! <3
Chapter 26

Chapter Notes

At Stark Industries there had been a thousand and one things to occupy his time. Not just the search for Tony, but the entire ambiance. Pepper had given him free rein under Jarvis’ tutelage and consequently he’d almost forgotten what it was like to be bored.

When he’d been on the run he’d gotten used to having nothing but his inner monologue for company. Now it was his only companion again.

Twenty. Four. Seven.

Fury cameoed on occasion, his visits all variations on the same theme. Just tell us the truth. We know about your condition. We know it's not your fault. We can work with you here.

When the good cop approach fell short they switched policy. The lights stayed on. He hardly slept, a dead man on his feet. Day and night lost all meaning, and although the chronology of his story became blurred he could recount the specifics like a mantra.

This isn’t what you think it is… there wasn’t any other way. Just because you're dead weight in a fight doesn't mean you hovering around me like- You were with her in her last moments, regardless of how things played out. That matters. That she wasn’t alone.

He came to, an ambiguous time later, unable to remember that he’d fallen asleep in the first place. He wiped a sliver of drool from his mouth and picked up the glasses from the bedside table.

Fury stared down at him from the other side of the glass, his expression grave.

“Rogers is awake.”

Everything of late had taken on a hazy, out-of-focus feeling, and it wasn't all entirely down to the fact that they'd replaced his broken glasses with a slightly wrong prescription.

Steve had testified on his behalf.

Supplementary to Cap’s corroboration fecal specimens attested the origin of Bruce’s hallucinogens; the Other Guy had snacked on alien beef jerky at some point. They speculated that both Bruce’s premature shift back into human form and the residual injuries could be blamed on alien-serum cross interaction.

He wasn’t confined to the underground cage anymore, but neither was he allowed to leave. Off the hook didn’t equal go-as-you-please in Fury’s book. Bruce never tried to get an outline on where Fury’s improviso citadel was located, other than that they were smack dab in the middle of badland, a command post fortified by miles and miles of arid sod.

So he’d sit on a patch of sand and rock outside the housing compound, watching scaffolding and keep-out signs of a construction site going on over at the main building, which was strictly off-limits to him. It became a daily ritual.

“Hey.”
He looked up, squinting against the sun.

“Agent Hill.”

Bruce never quite knew where he stood with Maria. He suspected that everything he said around her ended up reported back to Fury in one way or another. On the whole she seemed like a decent sort though.

“You know, we have air conditioning inside,” said Maria.

“I felt like some fresh air,” he said, carefully neutral. “I'm not a fan of being cooped up.”

“So I've heard.” She sat down in the sand next to him. “Permission to speak freely?”

“I wasn't aware that you needed my permission.”

They certainly hadn’t when they’d suspected him of slaughtering half his teammates.

“You don't look so good, Dr Banner.”

“I passed my latest medical just fine,” he said, already on the defensive. “Everything's out my system.”

Captain America wasn’t the only one with a step up to his metabolism. Nat and James Rhodes were both dead, while Tony's condition was being carefully withheld from him. And here Bruce was, strolling around without so much as a scratch to show for it. It felt indecent, somehow. Unjust.

He wondered if Steve felt the same way about these things. Probably not.

Maria scuffed at a stone. “We don't just have air conditioning. We have beds too. You're more than welcome to use yours.”

“You're spying on me?” he blurted, then caught himself. “Of course you are.”

“Trouble sleeping of late?”

“Maybe.”

“Want to talk about it?”

“I've talked about it a lot,” he said. “You were there for some.”

And of course she had to go straight for the jugular.

"I know you cared about Natasha,” said Maria. “I'd say she was a friend of mine, or as close as it gets in this line of work. Fury's upset as well, on a personal level, even if he's not showing it.”

Bruce couldn’t care less about what Fury felt. He wasn’t the one who could have made a difference, and failed.

They sat in silence; him feeling the skin go damp under his palms, her staring straight up ahead, expression blank. Eventually she stood up.

“Let me know if you need anything while you're staying with us.”

He wanted to turn back time, but that was out of Maria’s depth.
“There's one thing.” His tongue felt dry. It took a moment for words to come. “The cage.”

“The cage?”

“Can I...” The thought made him feel a little sick. “...sleep there? At night?”

Something that didn’t want to end up in the cage made a faint roar of protest in the back of his head. He breathed through it.

Maria nodded.

He wondered how she’d report it to Fury. She’d say that he was losing it, that he didn't trust himself to sleep.

And maybe, she had a point.

But he didn't care. He just wanted to sleep without worrying that his nightmares could end with him slaughtering half the base.

Things were better after that. He settled into a spartan three-meals-a-day life. The investigation sessions tapered out. He spent more and more time on his rock out in the courtyard, watching the scaffolding and the keep-out signs, and wondering whether they were all he’d get to see for the rest of his life.

It was on one of these trips that he was, at long last, reunited with Steve Rogers.

Steve looked perfect, statuesque. Not a hair was out of place. If Bruce didn’t know better he could have sworn Cap had just come in from an extended vacation rather than being wheeled off a shuttle with his face looking like a caved in jack o’ lantern. Steve’s duffel and blue checkered button-down were annoyingly disarming. Bruce would never warm up to seeing him in anything but combat gear and that trademark blue uniform of his.

Steve stepped into the lift, taking up more room than his broad shoulders physically required.

There was an awkward moment of silence.

“They’re transferring me,” Steve said eventually, and let the words sink in until the elevator doors opened for them on surface level.

Bruce couldn’t help the bout of envy. Steve had a ticket out of here while Bruce faced an adjournment sine die. It was unfair. He felt like a sulking child.

“A lot of what happened up there shouldn’t have,” said Steve.

Bruce shrugged. That was old news. To both of them.

He went for a conversational double-back.

“Have you heard anything about Tony? They’re keeping me in the dark.”

“They told me he’s... stable. But that’s all.”

“I guess it's for the best,” Bruce said carefully, as though they were talking casually about a mutual acquaintance instead of the half-mad amputee they'd dragged from the bowels of hell.
“Listen, doc.” Steve ran a hand through his freshly cut hair. “My heli lifts off in ten. I wanted to, I don’t know, say goodbye, I guess. Say thank you. For what you did up there. Say sorry. For Natasha. For Rhodes.”

Bruce’s stomach made a flip.

“They’re on my conscience too, you know,” Steve continued. “I went into it with my heart in the wrong place. And the way Tony was, the poison… that didn’t help.”

“You weren't yourself,” agreed Bruce, and it was easy to say that now, easy for them to be magnanimous to one another when they were back on Earth. It hadn’t been so straightforward on the ship, when Steve’s condition had endangered them all.

Steve wrinkled his nose. “Fury told me I’m let off the hook. Rhodes and Natasha are classified Killed In Action. They’ll probably let you go at some point. I don’t know about Tony. I don’t think he’ll come around on just a bottle of Xanax.”

“No. Probably not,” agreed Bruce dully.

Steve realigned the duffel on his shoulder and nodded into the direction of the air strip. “Well, I’d better be going. Wouldn’t want to miss my ride.”

Bruce nodded. This was as close to closure as they were going to get with each other.

“Take care, Steve,” he said lamely. “Good luck with...whatever they’ll have you do now.”

He felt strangely more alone now that Steve was off the compound. They’d barely seen each other to begin with, but knowing there was someone around who shared the experience gave off a reassurance he didn’t realize he had until it was gone.

Subsequently Bruce redoubled his efforts to be allowed to see Tony, intermittent requests turning into daily ones. They’d been here for as long as three weeks and he hadn’t seen Tony once.

At the very least Bruce had hoped to hear word from Pepper, who no doubt sat by Tony’s bedside night and day. Pampering Bruce’s guilt-ridden ego couldn’t be among her top priorities now that Tony was back, but the brush off still hurt.

It seemed that persistence paid off eventually because in characteristic SHIELD fashion, namely abruptly and with no warning, a personal entourage came to pick him up one morning, scooping him from his spot in the courtyard. Their destination was the main building. From there on it wasn’t a mystery as to where they were headed.

The medical ward was small, but well outfitted. SHIELD had nothing if not deep pockets.

“You have fifteen minutes,” his escort said.

It was a single room, stuffed with machines and monitors and a bed at the center. In it lay Tony, thin and pale and with his hair shorn off to the scalp. He was startlingly clean compared to how they'd found him, which only emphasized the sickly tone of his skin. Draped in sheets so white that they were almost luminous the whole set up had the effect of a deathbed shroud.

Bruce inched closer. The room was dusky. Someone had pulled the drapes over the window even though it was only mid-morning. There was a resident smell, the sweet, rotten kind that settled around old people, or terminally-ill patients.
He pulled over a chair and sat down.

Tony blinked and tried to turn his head. His one eye was going through the last stages of bruising, and he wore a neck brace. There wasn’t a lot of turning he could do with that. Bruce studied him for any signs of the manic rage that had been burning up in his eyes the last time he’d been coherent enough to string a sentence together. He looked peaceful now, mercifully doped up.

The corners of Tony’s chapped lips quirked up. It was a weak smile, and it cost him some effort. He seemed to be looking past Bruce though, rather than at him.

“Sun still out there?”

Bruce tried to return the sleepy half smile that Tony was offering, but it came out as more of a wince on his end.

“They wouldn’t let me visit sooner,” Bruce said, because it was important to him that Tony knew that he’d tried, that he hadn’t just been dumped into the lap of the next best caregiver.

Tony inclined his head a little more, and his unbalanced grin widened to reveal tooth gaps that hadn’t been there before.

“What about Freddie Mercury?” he drawled. “I love that guy.”

He made a venture to lift his right arm from under the covers, but barely managed to pull it an inch off the bed before letting it flop back down.

“No grubs, see?”

“That’s great,” said Bruce, and looked around the room. Of course Tony’s med chart was conveniently absent. Letting them catch up on old times was one thing, but anything beyond that Fury must had filed under the need-to-know category, which he didn’t consider Bruce to be part of.

Tony commenced with a monologue of half-sense ramblings. How he was going to get a guitar. That he made sure to tell the nurses to always tuck the blankets in around his feet. Something or other about cycles. How he really wanted a cheeseburger.

Bruce only half listened. He took stock of the machines keeping vigil over Tony, the many tubes and drains that disappeared under the covers. The doctor in him wanted to lift the blanket and see for himself what his colleagues had done to guide Tony back from the brink he’d been hovering on.

Something else struck him as odd, though.

He disrupted Tony’s chalk talk, clearing his throat.

“Where’s Pepper?” he asked, trying to be nonchalant about it.

Was that a spike in Tony’s heart rate or did he imagine that?

“Tony,” he said again, not liking the dead air that had settled. “Pepper’s here, right?”

More hesitation. He did not make _that_ up.

“She’s sourpussed,” admitted Tony. He closed his eyes, took a shallow breath.

“Pepper?” Bruce furrowed a brow. “Why?”
“Cause I didn’t call. Dunno. Got dumped. Can you dig that? All this for the pink slip.”

“She said that?” That sounded unlike anything Pepper would do. She had been resolutely clinging on to hope for years. “Are you sure?”

“Sure I’m sure. She’s a no-show. Hey. Think you can smuggle me a plectrum? For my six-string?”

Bruce put an insistent hand on Tony’s shoulder. It was bony under the skin, cold.

“Pepper didn’t come?”

“I guess she didn’t,” said Tony. “But I’m really tired now. Let’s do this another time.”

Unsurprisingly their little reunion got cut short well before the promised fifteen minutes, and by none other than the man in charge himself.

Fury stood in the doorway, all straight-back-no-fun attitude.

“Ok, doc,” he said. “That’s enough.”

“That’s enough,” parroted Tony. “Like you guys can ever get your fix with me.”

“Please tell me that was the drugs talking,” said Bruce. “You’ve contacted Pepper, right?”

Fury snorted.

“Yes, of course. We thought we’d breach national security concerns just so Mr Stark can get swept off his feet with chocolates and roses. Of course Potts doesn't know. This is dramedy enough without it ending up on TMZ.”

“She still thinks...?”

Fury looked deeply unimpressed. “How about we take this conversation outside? You seem to be upsetting our patient.”

In Bruce’s professional opinion the only thing able to upset Tony at that moment would have been someone tying a bowknot in his morphine drip.

But Fury’s word was law. They left. Tony told them not to come back unless it was with Mountain Dew and his plectrum, but didn’t pick up on the storm that was brewing outside his cot.

Maria Hill waited in a nearby briefing room with water and coffee.

“He recognized you, that’s good,” said Fury as they took their seats. “It’s been a bit of a struggle with him.”

Bruce didn't think that Tony had said anything particularly indicating recognition, but he was willing to let Fury believe that if it meant some kind of leverage in his favor.

Fury fished out a page from a paper envelope. It was a summary of Tony’s early bloods.

“The guy’s a breathing crack store. It needed two weeks to purge the bulk of it from his system and another of watering and love and all the BS to get him from vegged out to what you just saw.”

There was a tense silence. Bruce had a premonition of where things were going to go from here.
“You didn’t ask me to see him on a social call,” he prompted, because it was easier to just put these things up front. “There’s something else?”

Maria supplemented a small aluminum box. “We found this in his pocket, among other things. It’s the JARVIS system motherboard. Your report says he took it from the Iron Man suit before you relinquished it.”

“We need that chip serviceable,” explained Fury. “Efforts are made to salvage the craft as we speak, and we need the best intel we can get on it. Which is this.”

Maria opened the box and laid out Jarvis’ burnt chip before Bruce.

“I want it,” Fury said. “Installed. It’s important, as in galactic invasion level important. You want Business Class back to Kolkata? Convince your buddy to give up the access data and you’re set. You scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours. Comprende?”

And there it was.

If Bruce had learned anything, it was that nobody in SHIELD was ever nice for the sake of being nice. They hadn't let him see Tony because he’d been oh so well behaved.

He had an uncomfortable memory of Natasha sitting by his own bed, coaxing him into more and more Code Greens. Was this how it worked?

“I don't think Tony would be ok with that,” Bruce said in an astonishing understatement. “And for the record, Pepper wouldn’t either.”

Fury swatted a hand through the air. “Spare me the star-crossed lovers bullshit, doc. This isn’t Aerosmith and Armageddon. We got things up there that took a bite out of vibranium like it was old Aunt Bessie’s apple pie. You ever think on the odds of there being more ships out and about? Nastier nasties?”

Maria opted for a softer tone. “We assume Tony tracked everything through his AI. If we have the option of accessing the JARVIS program’s logs, then we can better treat Tony too, knowing what he’s been exposed to.”

“Look,” continued Fury, putting his palms face down on the desk. “Mr Iron Dick cozied up to momma alien for four years. He knows her girl buttons better than anyone, and I need all the bump ugly details.”

Bruce sighed against a threatening migraine. The problem was they both had a point. The scars from the war were still fresh. They were cruising along, just waiting for the other shoe to fall. How many more of those ships were out there, on equally slow courses bound for Earth? Was this a one-off or could a repeat conflict, an invasion on a much larger scale be right around the corner?

And Tony was clearly still very sick, in the sort of way that only Jarvis would have the first idea of how to treat. He could give a potentially life-saving history where everyone else was just best-guessing. Bringing him back might be Tony's best shot. And surely, he’d want Jarvis too, wouldn't he?

But on his own terms, Bruce suspected. If they were calling him in now it was because Tony, even in his addled state, refused to hand over that information. He didn't think for a moment that they hadn't tried asking already.

Fury tapped on Jarvis’ box.
“People died to bring this home, Dr Banner. I’m willing to work with you, but I’m not compromising. Stark’s not able to give a report unprompted, so here I am, asking you nicely to help him remember. Don’t think that if you decline everyone gets to go home. Your home will be three-hundred square feet of Hulk-proof living space, and we’ll supplement Stark’s IV regimen with enough pentothal until he squawks out Victoria’s secret the hard way.”

Bruce thought about Tony, lying drugged indefinitely, kept in a semi-vegetative state while faceless SHIELD agents prised his head apart for secrets.

He imagined being buried underground, forever, locked up with nothing but his own personal demons.

“We have a deal?” asked Fury in the kind of tone that implied how little any of this was up for debate.

Bruce stared down at the table. He felt faintly sick.

There was really only one thing he could do.

Chapter End Notes

So, Bruce gets a reprieve for now, Tony is still drugged within an inch of his life, Pepper is still in the dark and Steve has been reassigned.

Or has he?
It had been four years and thirty-three days since Pepper Potts had kissed Tony goodbye.

It had been four years and thirty-one days since she'd watched him go through that portal, sat on one of his overpriced couches in Malibu where he'd insisted she stay with Jim. In a grainy news shot he disappeared from her life, a tiny figure dwarfed against the sky and the weight of the missile on his back.

She hadn't realized that she'd been screaming until Jim had grabbed her by the shoulders and tried to calm her down. Only it hadn't worked, because he'd been crying too.

People were sympathetic at first.

Everyone was so focused on the clean up that Tony's death got swept under the carpet until the media ran out of Leviathans and dead children to report on. But then followed the battle of keeping the company above water, stocks plummeting in the wake of Tony's very public death.

She kept it dignified for the cameras, but ended up having choice words for anyone who broached the subject of Tony's inheritance. They didn't have a body. He was out there somewhere, with Iron Man and Jarvis protecting him from the elements. He was alive. He had come back from Afghanistan, he would come back from this.

Only he didn't.

One day Pepper stopped feeling that lurch of hope in her chest every time the phone rang. She got up that morning with a terrible hangover — courtesy of Tony's liquor cabinet — stepped on a plane, and resumed her job as CEO of Stark Industries.

Bruce Banner ended up an unlikely ally, working on examining energy traces at the portal site. He would only stay as long as it took to finish this one thing, he said, but he never seemed to get around to leaving. In the end he earned his keep by tossing in the odd lucrative idea for Stark R&D, and by occasionally being an open ear to vent to about the unfairness of having Tony so suddenly ripped from her life.

For the longest time she wouldn't allow them to open his will. Not until Director Fury himself came to her office one year later with the declaration that Tony was a legally dead man. She was nominated sole heir to his legacy, suddenly one of the richest women in America. It would go down as Tony Stark’s last grandiloquent gesture.

Jim had been the one who'd finally convinced her to start living her life again. She let herself inch out of her grief in baby steps. Cleaning out Tony's drawers. Tossing his care products from the bathroom. Gradually she let the bigger things sneak in too. Jim helped her remodel the Malibu bedroom after they had a heated debate over whether it was constructive for her to live there at all. She signed the first merger deal that aligned with her own business vision, rather than viewed through the lens of curating the company for someone else. She shook off the mantle of being Tony Stark’s widow, and began to pick up those pieces of herself that could form a whole without him.

(In her heart of hearts, she still held out hope.)
Then, in early June ‘16, Jarvis fielded a garbled phone call from a hole-and-corner source.

She would have ignored it for a crank call if not for the fact that the voice on the other end unmistakably belonged to Bruce Banner, and he was the last person to pull anything so cruel, especially this close to the fourth anniversary of Tony’s death. Bruce sounded almost panicked, rushing her through a torrent of filler words about how he really shouldn’t be doing this, but that she had the right to know all the same.

He talked like a man on the run, and she had trouble keeping up with what he wanted to say. Then the revelation: Tony was alive.

Her immediate reaction — after dropping the phone — was to put Jarvis through the wringer.

Jarvis had known about the signal. Jarvis had not informed her of the signal, by deliberate judgment. The signal, a generic SOS distress call, had been put out by Tony two years ago. Two years ago! She hardly listened to Jarvis’ advocacy after, a convoluted explanation on programming directives, verification, and hard-coded procedure injunctions that somehow preempted Pepper’s involvement.

She was angry, a mad resentment for an entity that wasn’t capable of feeling remorse. How could they have left her in the dark about something of this magnitude? Where was Tony? She needed to get Bruce back on the line! Why was Jarvis this obstinate?

What followed was a whirlwind of angry phone calls, culminating with her being put through to Maria Hill, who denied all and any allegations until Pepper threatened with public investigation.

Yes, came the reluctant confirmation then. Tony was alive.

But it was complicated, world security was at stake, and Hill couldn’t say any more at this point. She strung along how she’d contact Pepper once they had more intel, and hung up.

Before the disconnect beep even played she was already dialing Jim’s number. Secrecy be damned, he deserved to know that his best friend was alive. And maybe he had a whip hand against SHIELD which Pepper didn’t.

She rang him up four times, repeatedly stood up to voicemail. Of course he’d have to be off on some junket trip for the military right now. Exasperated, Pepper left him a message, how he had to call her when he got it, the second he got to it, because this wasn’t just important, this was crunch time.

Jarvis was for once a very poor confederate. He administered every task Pepper imposed on him, but he did it with no more of a rush than a clock whose hands refused to move prematurely. Pepper wasn’t entirely sure what subtle shift of loyalty the AI had made three years back when she’d executed the twelve-digit code Tony had left her in his will, but there had been an unmistakable transformation ever since Bruce’s call.

She didn’t have time to fuss over Jarvis though. Pepper had her hands more than busy with the badgering and threats of legal action, of raining down a media shitstorm the likes of which SHIELD had never seen if they didn’t hand over Tony. Her blackmail attempts were met with silence. Then came the waiting, days that dragged out into perceived decades. She didn’t dare tell anyone else, partly because of the aforementioned national security issue, partly because she didn't want to play her hand too early, and threats were all she had.

Jim never got in touch.

Then, finally, an exasperated phone call from Nick Fury. A detailed plan, followed by a series of instructions which sounded like he’d pulled them straight out of a Hollywood spy flick.
She was to keep Tony somewhere secluded, out of the public eye, and take on responsibility for his convalescence. The word threw up images of black-and-white war movies and bandaged men in sanatoriums staring out at the countryside. Fury’s extensive shopping list of medical equipment didn’t put her at ease, but she was willing to throw in any amount of effort and money if it aided Tony.

Fury made her swear under pain of treason to keep it all under the table for as long as SHIELD needed to smooth out the details of Tony’s official return. When she agreed he sent her a rendezvous point.

So after four years and thirty-three days Pepper Potts found herself standing on a helipad in the middle of precisely nowhere, with a handful of SHIELD escorts motioning briskly for her to follow them to a black, tinted van.

They spurred along until a multi-building complex came into view, a concrete behemoth she’d already seen from up in the air. Barbed wire fencing ran all around the premises, and something told Pepper that it hadn’t been put in place just to keep out the rodents.

The car drew to a halt in front of a double-doored entrance, where Maria Hill already stood waiting. The reception capped out at a curt nod from Hill, a ‘visitor’ plastic badge, and a welcome committee of two armed guards who took up trail at a distance. Pepper had worked long enough in the arms business to tell that their weapons weren’t just for show.

“It’s this way,” said Hill and navigated them through a drab grey labyrinth. The corridors were bleak, identical doors at identical intervals. After a series of turns they stopped in front of one which looked as characterless as the rest. There was no label to accentuate its further purpose.

“He’s in there,” Hill said. “Take a moment while I go fetch Director Fury.”

She left, and the guards took up stance on either side of the door. Pepper felt more and more like she was visitor to a high-security prison rather than a friendly SHIELD facility.

She told herself it didn’t matter. The grand prize was behind that door, and that was the only thing of importance. Pepper steeled herself and turned the knob. The room was small, no doubt a hard copy of all the rooms they had passed by on the way. An oblong metal table stood in the center, with four cheap metal chairs surrounding it on either side.

Currently only one was occupied.

She’d imagined this moment many times, in many different scenarios. In her head he was always a little bedraggled, a little worse for wear. The way he’d stepped off that plane when he’d returned from Afghanistan, a scratch and a bruise and a hidden nuclear reactor in his chest. Maybe she’d overlapped that memory with her wishful thinking, because she kept waiting for a displaced bout of sarcasm, some witty one-liner only Tony Stark could think of at the most inopportune moment.

He was silent.

Pepper went over. He followed her with his eyes, big, glassy orbs that sat too deep in their sockets. She couldn’t say what he was on, only that he was on a lot of it.

He was very, very thin. He swam in the suit he wore, a cheap polyester two-piece that looked like someone had pulled a burlap sack over him. She didn’t think she’d ever seen a human being as pale as he was, sitting there. It went beyond white, crossing over into a translucent greenish tinge. He looked as though he was dead. Like he had, at one point, started to rot.

Tony’s right arm was in a cast, immobilized by a sling looping around his chest. He held himself
hunched, as though he was in a lot of pain despite whatever they had given him. He wasn’t sitting in one of the cheap metal chairs either; he was propped up in a wheelchair.

Pepper felt the sudden, unshakable need to touch him. She reached for his other hand, trailing her fingers across the itchy sleeve of his suit, all the way down to where it stopped in the rolled-up fold.

She recoiled as though she had burnt herself.

Tony looked on somberly. “Not pretty. Creeps me out too,” he said in what she’d always called his Bourbon-voice. That was what he sounded like halfway through a bottle, slurred words, numb tongue, shut out of his own head. But there was no alcohol smell on him today. He wasn’t drunk, she thought, he was sedated. Vigorously so.

Panicked, Pepper looked under the table edge. Both legs were there in their entirety, and she counted five fingers poking out from the cast of his right hand.

Fear turned into anger.

Nick Fury had not told her any of this.

He’d plunged her into the waves without warning that it was a tempest. Was he watching now, how she fought to keep her head above water? Was he zooming in on her face, wagering with Hill on when she’d dissolve into tears? Pepper ground her jaw. She would not give them that satisfaction. She had to be strong where Tony couldn’t. And clearly he couldn’t be strong right now. He looked like he would crumple in his wheelchair if the backrest wasn’t there to support him.

Pepper put a hand on the nape of his neck. The skin was cool and clammy. Corpse-like, she thought, and couldn’t shake the comparison. Someone had found him, and now they’d called her in so she could take him and bury him, and allow him his final rest.

“Oh, Tony.”

She wanted to add ‘I missed you’, or ‘Are you all right?’, or ‘I always knew you’d make it’, but everything she thought of to say was out of place.

Hill returned with Director Fury ten minutes later.

Pepper gasped at the surge of oxygen rushing through the open door. She never thought it was possible to feel this uncomfortable around another person, least of all Tony, this thing that was living in his skin and sapping the life out of him with every breath.

He’d asked her if she was here to take him home, in that dopey dreamy tone in which he garbled all his words. She’d told him yes, of course, she’d get him out, just not to Malibu. But he’d like it there, she assured him, it was warm, and sunny, and the view was divine. Tony had smiled, an unbalanced grimace that crinkled the skin around his eyes. God, he’d said — he’d slurred it gaawd — gaawd, he hadn’t seen the sun in years. He’d capped the last s too; it sounded like someone had gagged a snake halfway through a hiss.

Tony hadn’t said a word since then. In the eight minutes leading up to Fury’s arrival Pepper had sat motionless in her chair, clutching her LV purse instead of her lover’s missing hand.

“Ms Potts,” said Fury as he took a seat across from them.

He slapped a manila folder on the desk. It read ANTHONY STARK in large, bolded font and
looked like it had passed through a number of hands before making it here. There were dog ears on
the pages and coffee stains on the wrapper. Pepper glimpsed a post-it note that said, *renewed incident
—> file for reevaluation* in red Sharpie. The handwriting looked rushed.

Exchanging glances with Tony (who hadn’t reacted to the new arrival other than twitching briefly at
the shutting of the door), Pepper decided to go for a full charm offensive.

“Nick.” She smiled widely. They’d never been on a first-name basis. “It’s so good of you to come in
person to see us off.”

“Listen, I’d rather skip the honey-mouthing.”

Not for the first time Pepper really missed Phil Coulson.

“I’ll spare you the small print,” Fury said, and took a pen from his shirt pocket. He began to circle
and underline individual paragraphs as he filed through the pages. “Domiciliary detention at a remote
location of your choosing, no access to outside communication, networking, or any other form of
electronics apart from those listed here.”

Pepper glanced over the grant catalogue. What was Fury so afraid of? That Tony would stage an
attempt at world domination from his rehab bastille? The only thing he was in danger of was
drooling on that cheap excuse of a suit.

“…weekly medical reports in all points outlined, strict compliance to therapeutic recommendations
given by our specialists…”

Fury talked in the dull, monotone rhythm usually reserved to overpaid notaries. Discharge was
subject to physical and psychiatric evaluation — conducted by SHIELD personnel, naturally — and
they expected Tony’s cooperation in all matters concerning The Mission, his four years off Earth,
and all his gleaned knowledge on alien technology.

“If you agree,” Fury said. “I need your initials here, here, and here. Full signature at the bottom.”

“This includes all NDA arrangements up to the point of Mr Stark’s release back into the public,”
added Hill.

They were talking about Tony like he was some mongrel Pepper had to sign shelter release
documents for.

“You do realize,” she said to Fury. “That I still have a company to run. I agree that keeping this low
profile is best for everyone right now.” She glanced at Tony, whose attention was piqued by Hill’s
coffee mug. “But I need to stay connected. And if you want your weekly reports you’ll agree. It’s
either that, or we move him somewhere more central.”

She hoped they would take the bait. She hadn’t been made aware of the severity of Tony’s medical
condition. The island domicile had been checked for standard by a SHIELD hireling, but coming to
learn of Fury’s paranoid fears he’d probably been sent to make sure that Tony couldn’t build a rocket
out of the smoothie maker, not whether or not he’d be able to get in or out of bed unassisted.

“The documents pertain to Mr Stark only,” said Hill. “You’re free to come and go as your
obligations require. In fact, we’d appreciate if you kept up your public appearances.”

Pepper was no lawyer, but she had a hunch that most of this wasn’t legally binding. She had zero
power of attorney over Tony, who would be more than capable of making his own decisions if they
hadn’t pumped him to the eyeballs with narcotics. Which hopefully meant that they could loophole
the shit out of those documents later.

She flipped through the pages again, wishing even so to have been able to run it by Legal before putting pen to paper. Still, it seemed like more of a power play on Fury's part than anything else. She shot Tony what she hoped was an ace-up-the-sleeve smile and signed.

Once she got him out of here they would come up with a plan together.

“Hey,” said Tony suddenly. He was working hard to coordinate his tongue. “The chip. I want it.”

That sparked Pepper’s attention. It was the first thing Tony had mustered verbal skills over since she’d entered the room.

“What chip?” she asked in a tone that was anything but casual, despite her best attempts.

“Mine,” said Tony, and made an up-down gesture with his stump-arm. “Give him back.”

“We were hoping you’d be willing to set it up in one of our systems,” Hill said.

Tony shifted in his chair, only to lose focus a moment later. He bit at his lower lip. He was fighting an internal dispute that Pepper wasn’t privy to. “Where is it? Give it back,” he repeated. He sounded like a kid scared out of his wits, considering to tell the police whatever they wanted to hear and be let go.

“What is that?” Pepper asked again. She didn’t like how they were goading Tony, how they’d chosen the moment of his release to torture him with whatever was on that chip.

“The JARVIS motherboard from the Iron Man armor,” explained Hill.

Tony flinched at the mention of his AI’s name. Pepper found it highly suspicious that SHIELD would go through the trouble of dismantling Tony’s suit in order to remove Jarvis.

“I want it,” said Tony.

“Help us decode the data on it.”

“Jarvis is intellectual property,” Pepper ventured carefully. She didn’t know why they had Jarvis, only that Tony wouldn’t be willing to hand him over to anyone. That’s why he’d left her the entire Iron Man schematics instead of making the knowledge publicly available. Even War Machine was her property now, despite Jim Rhodes being its pilot for years.

“Well, you’re out of luck,” said Fury dismissively. “If we can't use it, you can't have it.”

At that Pepper drew herself up to her full height, the whole 5’4” of it. She was used to dealing with greasy shareholders rather than US government covert spy masters, but a dick was a dick. And she wasn’t about to let Nick Fury swing his in their faces.

“Jarvis isn't property of Stark Industries, he's mine. Specifically, as per Tony’s directives in his will.” She held out her hand to silence Hill. “I can sue the living daylights out of you, and it would be entirely in my rights to do so.”

“We're talking about an incident involving national, no, world security, and you're lecturing me on IP rights?” Fury was incredulous.

“I kept things quiet in good faith so far, but don’t take me for a fool,” Pepper said. “Don’t pretend you have a leg to stand on here, Director. You don’t want this to be on the front page of The Times
tomorrow. I don’t think you can use that kind of publicity hit after what you pulled with the
Asgardians.”

But Fury refused to discuss the matter further.

Tony sagged in on himself in his wheelchair about halfway through the formalities. He really needed
a break, he told them. He had to lie down, he said. He didn’t care about the chip, at least not right
now. She wouldn't let this drop, Pepper assured him. They’d get it back, if it was important to him.

She wanted to give Fury hell for parading him around in a wheelchair to begin with, when clearly
the only place he belonged in was a hospital bed. She wanted to tell herself that maybe it was Tony’s
stubbornness which had landed him in a suit instead of a hospital gown, but that was idle wishing
more than anything. She didn’t think Tony was capable of such plotting, not in his current condition.

They settled him in the SHIELD issued jet then, where a contingent of staff waited for their in-flight
comfort. Tony transitioned from wheelchair to gurney, after which two red cross shirts assumed his
further monitoring. They gave him pills to swallow, which he did so eagerly. Pepper sat with him
until the meds kicked in; he went out like a light within minutes.

“Isn’t Dr Banner coming?”

One of the conditions for Tony’s release was Bruce Banner’s accompaniment to the island. Pepper
hadn’t thought much on it before, had even been a little nonplussed at the demand. Having spent an
hour around Tony she now fully understood. He was in need of round-the-clock medical care, and
Bruce probably had a high enough security clearance to fill the role as Tony’s personal doctor. She
was glad it would be Bruce joining them, instead of some nameless SHIELD lackey.

“He’s getting read the riot act ahead of your little island summer camp,” Fury said.

“He’s just going over Tony’s treatment plan with the staff,” offered Hill. Pepper supposed the truth
lay somewhere between the two statements.

It occurred to her that Bruce not being part of the original meeting was probably to avoid turning it
into a three-on-two. He had, after all, been the one to spill the beans to Pepper.

When Bruce eventually arrived, he did so escorted by an armed entourage of his own. He smiled a
little hollowly, but didn’t say anything. He looked thinner than the last time she’d seen him, a man
who’d aged several years in the space of a month. She tried to catch his eye, but he seemed fixated
on his own shoelaces.

The farewell was stony. Hill wished them good luck, and Fury saw them off with an expression that
suggested they had better play by the rules.

On the plane Bruce glanced over Tony’s slack form before settling into a seat of his own.

Pepper was itching to interrogate them both, to get some outline, no matter how sketchy, of what was
going on. All she knew was that there had been a mission, a team had found Iron Man, and they’d
brought Tony home. How Bruce was involved, how they had ended up in the middle of a South
American desert, and why nobody had alerted her the moment Tony had been rescued was all a
mystery.

But she bit her tongue. Even if the staff wasn’t actively eavesdropping, she had no doubts that Fury
had the jet bugged.

She’d have to wait just a little while longer, she supposed.
The plane roared to life and beside her Bruce, who had so far failed to speak, tapped her on the arm. She looked up as he shoved something small and jagged into her hand and there was an odd panic in his expression, like he was about to be caught with something he shouldn't have, or which he wanted desperately to get rid of. She didn't open her palm to look at what it was before putting it into her handbag, but she suspected she already knew.

Jarvis.

They'd been airborne for a good twenty minutes, her staring at Tony (who was either sleeping peacefully, or just sedated to oblivion) before Bruce spoke.

“It's going to be ok,” he said.

She wasn't sure how sincere the sentiment was, but given Tony's state and the bizarre hostility of the afternoon's events, she decided she'd take it. They'd muddle through.

Where Tony was concerned, she always did.

Chapter End Notes

Everyone, please welcome Pepper Powerhouse Potts, our forth and final narrative voice of this installment!

Here's a reimagining of how your tragic, overdue Pepperony reunion could look like:

Also, we'd like to take a moment to thank each and everyone of you for your continued support! You readers, you bookmarks, and especially you reviewers -- you have no idea how much your feedback means to us!

So THANKS!
They eased Tony into the house while one of the more tenacious SHIELD staff hovered around in the doorway like a shit date hoping against the odds to be invited in for coffee. It took Pepper all her reserve patience to ask him politely if he would mind leaving them to get settled instead of telling him outright to sod off. It was only after the sound of the jet engines fading in the distance that she dared abandon her backfield spot in the foyer, finally able to shake off the paranoia of them coming back.

She found Bruce in what was the designated bunk room on the house’s floor plan, which she’d remodeled into an infirmary according to Fury’s instructions. Bruce was fiddling with one of the monitors. He looked up when she entered.

“This is good. This is really great equipment.”

She didn’t much care about the equipment.

“How is... is he doing ok?”

Tony was firmly ensconced in the hospital grade bed. He was out of it, as he’d been for most of the ride over. Bruce had opened the first two buttons on his dress shirt in order to stick on the leadwire sensors connecting to the host of machines in the background, bug all Pepper could see was the dark molding contour of a fading bruise peering out from underneath.

“He’s fine. Stable. See? He’ll just sleep it off.” Bruce pointed at a set of digital charts that meant nothing to her.

They locked gazes. This was the moment where she was supposed to ask what the hell was going on, or provide some lackluster thank you for Bruce’s incentive to contact her, or have that heartfelt teary-eyed reunion that got scripted into every silver screen playbook. She sat down next to the bed instead, looking down at Tony’s spindly form. She wanted to undress him right then and there, not out of a physical urge, but to start tracking the amount of damage Fury hadn’t lost a single word about. Repeatedly, her eyes locked on the sleeve-fold of his left arm.

“Whoever had the idea to dress him up like this?” she asked, fingering the fabric of the cheap suit. “Surely they could have made him more comfortable.”

“I think he wanted to look nice for you,” Bruce said. “He got very excited once Fury told him you were coming.”

Her chest constricted a little. The old Tony wouldn't have been caught dead in a badly fitting outfit.

Bruce seemed to get it, on some level, or she must have let the horror show on her face because he was quick to add, “There was an Armani shortage on base.”

She wasn't sure if he was trying to ease the tension, or making a veiled dig about materialism.

“Everything I bought is in his old size,” she said. Somehow that was a foreground problem now. It was easier to focus on trivialities like clothes rather than digging for the root cause of why they wouldn’t fit.
“Bruce,” she said slowly, deciding that knowing was favorable to not knowing. She wouldn’t be able to bury her head in the sand if she wanted to. “What happened to him?”

Bruce looked genuinely confused, then worried, like something was only just dawning on him.

“How much do you know?”

“That they found him. I know about the SOS.”

“That’s all?”

She glanced down at Tony. Her insight barely scratched the surface of what he must have been through.

“Yes. That’s all.”

Bruce heaved a deep sigh. She wasn’t in for a bedtime story, that much was a given.

“There were four of us to start with,” he said, and it felt like ‘once upon a time’. “Myself, Steve Rogers, James Rhodes, and—”

“Jim was—”

He held up a hand.

“And Natasha Romanoff. When I ran into that SOS I considered telling you, but I didn't. I went to Rhodes instead. It was such an old mayday, I thought the chances of it yielding anything were minimal, but once we showed it to Fury he was like a dog with a bone. He wanted us to go up there, to check it out.”

“Wait. You were there? Part of the team?”

She didn't know what she'd assumed. That Bruce had been brought in after the fact, as medical back up, or a familiar face, or for something science related. She hadn't thought that he'd actually gone into space looking for Tony.

“Where’s Jim? Why isn’t Rhodey here?”

Bruce’s voice caught in his throat. “Let me just... you deserve answers. And I’m trying, I really am. But you have to let me do this at my own pace. Ok?”

In the time between Bruce’s call and her journey to the SHIELD compound Pepper had come up with a number of theories as to what those four limbo years could have entailed. None of them were even remotely fulfilling.

Tony floating alone in space in his Iron Man suit.

Tony on some alien planet far outside the realms of human imagination.

Tony flying through the portal, and Tony dying of asphyxiation on the other side.

“He was on a Chitauri ship,” said Bruce. “I think a prisoner at first. He got sick at one point, passed on an infection that their immune systems couldn’t handle, and that must have killed them. That’s what we pieced together at least. He doesn’t talk a lot, not about the early time.”

That sounded like the Tony she knew. He hadn’t lost three sentences about Afghanistan in all the
years she’d been with him, which had been the pinnacle of his trauma back before the portal. Nobody did repression quite like Tony Stark.

She fast-forwarded back to the present. She didn’t want to be the snappy kid pressing for continuation, but they weren’t any closer to explaining why Tony was in the shape he was in. None of his current injuries could be blamed on the flu.

“What happened to the arm?”

Bruce shrugged. “The Chitauri weren’t the only things on that ship. There were other creatures. Creatures that didn’t die in the epidemic.”

“And they...?” She left it deliberately open-ended.

“He never told me, but that’s my guess. It was a self-amputation, that much he let on. But he never went into the details of it. Anyway.” Bruce cleared his throat, clearly in desperate need to change topics. “He was able to synthesize a chemical, something that, along with the suit and Jarvis, allowed him to put himself through these long cycles of induced comas. The ship was on a slow course for Earth and basically I think he was hoping to sleep out the worst of the journey. Then we showed up and, uh, Nat accidentally fried the ship systems, and we ran into Tony who was awake, but so were all the monsters and...”

Bruce swallowed hard. He waved a hand, but the words stopped coming.

“Would you excuse me for a moment? I’m just... water. Give me a second.”

Her eyes trailed after him as he darted for the kitchen, but she was unable to offer any words of solace, or even anything at all. Instead she looked back down at Tony, at the shirtsleeve that was kept in place by a safety pin, and she wondered at what point he had made the decision that, whatever injury had been sustained, it was too extensive to maintain the arm. What choice would she have made in his stead? Would she have relied on Jarvis’ verdict? Probably. Would she have had the strength to do what Tony had done? She wasn’t sure.

Pepper trailed her fingers down his arm, feeling gingerly for the knob of flesh under the clothing. Tony stirred slightly, but it was more reflex movement than anything else. Then Bruce was back and she quickly retracted her hand to where it had rested on Tony’s shoulder. She felt a rush of embarrassment creep up on her cheeks, as though caught doing something scandalous.

Bruce looked nauseated. It needed no psychoanalyst to see how hard recounting these events was for him. She wanted to spare him more discomfort just as much as she wanted to take him by the collar and shake the information out of him. Pepper swallowed dryly, and wished she could get a glass of water herself. But that meant leaving Tony, and she made a decision for herself, right there in that very moment, to not abandon Tony again.

She took another deep breath.

“What injuries he has right now? What he needs in terms of care?”

Bruce’s trip to the kitchen had done little for his composure, but at least he no longer seemed in imminent danger of bursting into tears.

“Radius and ulna are...” he began, but must have realized that rattling off a load of medical terminology wasn’t going to be helpful to Pepper. “He’s had extensive surgery. They had to mechanically fasten his ribcage and pelvis after... what happened. We’ll go through that another time, ok? The broken arm is the least of his worries, but between that and the, uh, well, his other one, he
needs help with almost everything.”

And he'd get it, Pepper thought. She'd provide it all.

“I know it's not ideal,” continued Bruce. “But right now keeping him sedated means keeping him comfortable and out of pain. He spent four years pumping himself full of synthesized narcotics. Unfortunately that gave him the tolerance of an elephant when it comes to painkillers.”

Pepper supposed Tony hadn’t started out from square zero in any matters concerning tolerance, but it didn’t do to dig out past shortcomings, at least not now.

“There’s one other thing.”

There were plenty of other things, no doubt. She put on a brave face.

“Reading between the lines I think Jarvis talked him into doing those cyclical comas because he was pushing for some really self-destructive tendencies,” Bruce explained. “Please don't take it personally if he's not always himself.”

“I won't. Of course I won't. I understand.”

Bruce gave her a look which suggested that she couldn't even possibly begin to understand.

That rattled at her composure. Was Tony crazy? Would he need a straight jacket once the cast came off?

“Is he dangerous?” she asked.

Bruce hesitated long enough to make her stomach constrict.

“He wasn’t in the best shape when we found him. Physically and...” Bruce tapped a finger to his temple. “He was volatile. Very touch and go. Those were exceptional circumstances of course, him being so violently pulled from his adopted patterns and routines, and unable to acclimate to what was going on at the speed he was forced to.”

Bruce sighed. “I’m not going to lie; he had some very disturbing episodes up there, and on a handful of occasions I was scared of him, not knowing what was going on in his head. He’s made a lot of improvements in the past month, but just be careful. Don’t expect too much, too soon.”

She nodded dumbly. All she wanted was for Tony to get better, but she wasn’t fool enough to see a miracle in the cards anytime soon. This was going to be an uphill battle, and they’d all scrape their knees before they saw the top of the climb.

As a welcome distraction Bruce ran her through the details of Tony’s diet (liquid mainly, with solids being introduced gradually) and what he knew of his daily routine. So far they’d covered the acute afflictions, but a lot had accumulated from living in space that would affect his rehabilitation. Malnutrition and scurvy had put Tony’s body in shutdown mode. Wounds weren’t healing properly, and he was still so intensely underweight. He couldn’t go out, not without shade and sunblock, and he had a hard time adjusting to bright lights, despite being back on Earth for a fortnight. He was bed-bound, with short intervals in the wheelchair acceptable, but not enforced.

Pepper decided to handle it like a corporate game plan: one step at a time. She untangled her hand from where she’d interlaced it through the fingers poking out from Tony’s cast. Then she went over to Bruce and pulled him into a long, warm embrace.
“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for bringing him home.”

“Don’t,” Bruce said, and from the way he tensed under her touch, she could tell he was wildly uncomfortable about the gesture. “Please.”

Pepper let go.

“Let me show you around,” she decided, and forced on a smile. “Once you get settled we can change Tony into something more convenient, and come up with a road map for all of this.”

Bruce didn’t say yay or nay, but as she walked him to the guest room he complimented the interior fittings. Despite everything, she thought that was a considerate gesture.

She wasn’t sure how she’d envisioned this going down. Maybe, naively, part of her had imagined dressing up a doll. Standing there now, armed with an MIT logo t-shirt and a pair of matching sweats, she was at a loss of where to begin.

Bruce said nothing and Tony, lying in bed like a stranded, dried out crystal said even less.

What she hadn’t considered in her quest of grooming Tony was the in-between part, where she’d peel the dress shirt off him and get her first good look at how bad things really were.

“I can do it alone,” offered Bruce. “You don’t have to.”

“But I do,” she said. “Show me.”

She’d never touched someone so completely slack. It was the oddest affair, and not in a good way. It felt like handling a corpse. Despite all of Tony’s jaunts as Iron Man Pepper had never come this close to a lifeless body. Together they carefully stripped Tony of his clothes. Bruce coached her, how to best hold him, where to touch and where not to, how much to lift and twist his arms and legs and head as not to overtax his gravely impaired mobility. He had a serious case of whiplash on top of everything, Bruce said.

“Careful with the right leg. Yeah, that’s better.”

Tony himself didn’t give more feedback than the occasional groan when she really overdid it. He opened his eyes once to tell them he didn’t like it so rough, but fell back into his default haze the moment he said it.

The sight of him was worse than what she’d been prepared for. He reminded her of concentration camp survivors, of men in faded pictures she’d seen of Auschwitz and Birkenau. There was skin rash and bruising and tender pink scarring that was too straight and orderly to be left by anything but a scalpel. There were other scars too, jagged and rough and badly healed.

The stump was the worst, like a car accident that you couldn’t look at and not take your eyes off at the same time. Pepper had never seen an amputee before. She'd pictured it as smooth and round, not this craggy, lump mass of burned and fibrous skin. Looking away she took in his other arm, the one that was still whole, and found it lined with injection marks both old and new. It was horrific, all of it, a patchwork of desperation and brutality etched into his body. If she'd imagined that there would be anything tragic or heroic in his injuries she'd been deluding herself. All she could think of was how grotesque they were, and that she didn’t want to look any longer than she really had to. Bruce was mercifully silent throughout the rest of the procession, and by the end of it Tony had come around enough for her to call it semi-coherence.
It reminded her a little of when she'd go to bed early during some long party, and Tony would stay up playing poker and then stumble into bed half undressed, smelling like scotch and cigarettes and promising her the moon if she was just willing to reach for it.

Bruce had conveniently cleared out by this point. She sat back down next to the bed, glad for a moment of privacy. She stroked a hand through the stubble of Tony’s buzz cut. He screwed up his face in something which she couldn’t tell was a smile or a frown, but he drew the corners of his lips up enough for her to see that he was missing some of his teeth.

“How was the nap?” she asked.

“Exhausting,” he said. "Are you real?"

“As real as it gets.” She patted his hand. "Feel any better?"

He gave this some thought. “Did I win the LA Marathon? Sure feels like I tried.”

She smiled. “You gave it your all.”

“Points for that,” he said, and let his eyes flutter closed against her caressing touch.

There were a hundred thousand things that she wanted to say to him, to ask him, to hear words coming from his mouth again. Not even the big stuff, just inconsequential nothings, little turns of phrases and Tony-specific witticisms that she thought had been lost forever.

“Tony?”

“Mhm?”

“This isn’t Malibu,” she said. “But I think it’ll do. It’s a quiet little place. Good for putting your feet up. For taking a break.”

His breathing came a little slower. She thought that maybe he’d fall asleep again. But then the muscles in his jaw snagged and he said, “I could really use a break.”

“Yes, I think you could.”

She didn't want to be like this, tearing up every five minutes around him, overwhelmed and hyper-emotional. But if there was a moment for it all to come spilling out, then surely it was now. She planted a chaste kiss on his forehead. He tasted like iodine and something fishy.

“Tony... I don't know how to be right now. I don't know what you want, or need, or what you're ok with, or how you're feeling. But I love you. I never stopped. You know that, right?”

He had that owly, red-around-the-eyes look that he usually got when he was on his way from moderately tickled to thoroughly tanked. He looked at her, through her, a focal point somewhere between the ceiling and the sky.

“Tony gave her all the money and blew a little kiss,” he buzzed along to some tune in his head. "If they ask you how it happened say I forced you into this.”

She patted his forehead. She couldn’t tell if he was joking, or if he’d genuinely missed the point.

“You’re a crooner now?”

“Today, yeah.” He laughed. “Tomorrow, maybe not. You’ll have to stick around to see I guess. I
could get you front row seats. You plus one. Is that a fair deal or what?"

She squeezed his hand. “I’m not going anywhere, Tony. I’m here for you. No one else.”

Tony nodded, looking suddenly worn out again. “I think I need the doc now, Pep. And the meds.”

She furrowed a brow. “Are you hurting?”

“A little here, a little there,” Tony mumbled. “Nothing too bad. Just ready to count my sheep.”

“Why don’t you start with that while I go fetch what you need?”

“Can do,” he said, nodding. By the time she returned with Bruce, he was already fast asleep.

They had dinner after that, Bruce and her, a drawn-out somewhat tense affair. Tony woke up twice more, once to sip a little bit of water, and once to use the bedpan. Bruce told her he’d keep an eye on him for the night and she retreated, reluctantly, to the master bedroom.

The mattress was too hard and the room too hot and her head too full with grainy sepia photographs of Tony standing naked behind a barbed wire fence, clutching his concave chest against the cold of an early Polish spring. She tossed and turned a lot that first night, thinking about Chitauri and portals and getting her flu shot in time this year.

Chapter End Notes

So Tony's finally getting some love here and Pepper's gearing up her BAMFness to fix things in need of fixing. Will everything be smooth sailing from now on? No, certainly not - see the surveillance feed above - but why don't you just enjoy a moment's respite before we crush your hopes again?
Also, check out this lovely work inspired by this story (and be sure to drop some well deserved feedback!):

**Survivors Who Doubt Their Survival** (1045 words) by DumpsterDiving101
It was barely a few days into what marked the beginning of Tony’s recovery, and Pepper had already begun to gradually embellish the term of recovery with parentheses. Whenever she wasn’t nursing Tony or helping Bruce nurse Tony in matters that required two sets of hands, she was second guessing her insistence on liberating Tony from SHIELD’s dominion ahead of time.

Pepper had worked a number of shitty jobs in her life. She'd waitressed through college in a diner with dubious clientele and even more dubious food hygiene standards. Even through her initial stint as Tony's PA she'd done some fairly unsavory tasks, from ordering and picking up the apology basket of sex toys Tony had bought for a fling, to finding stained female underwear in Tony’s office. She'd cleaned up sticky body fluids from his desk and been forced to listen to him rail the blonde of the day over his Malibu home balcony.

It was, in all seriousness, a miracle that they'd ever started dating.

But the last few days had been a challenge of a different kind. She hadn't considered the reality of what would ever happen if Tony ended up disabled, despite the fact that he put himself in danger of it every time he flew out in the suit.

She never thought she’d have to help him wash, to wipe his ass whenever he took a (mostly liquid) shit, or how she’d change bandages and bedsheets when he passed out on a load of painkillers and lost control of his bladder. She had never seen herself cleaning spat-out blood from a bowl after brushing his teeth for him, but here she was doing it all.

Under any other circumstances she would have hired a nurse, but the need for isolation and secrecy meant that all the money in the world couldn't buy help right now. Bruce made an effort to spare her the worst of it. She knew that when he asked her if she wouldn't mind fetching this or that, he was really just getting her out of the room so she didn't have to watch something particularly unsettling.

Tony was so severely underweight that they had to feed him every few hours, a tasteless, odorless liquid that he’d take three or four half-hearted sips of before he claimed to be full. At this rate she had no idea how he was supposed to reach anything close to his old weight.

He couldn’t sleep through the nights, so subsequently neither could Bruce or Pepper. They set up a fold out camp bed in Tony's room and split the shifts. Bruce insisted on staying close to hand. Tony needed almost constant drugs administration and Pepper was terrified of messing up dosages or of sticking him with the wrong thing. It made her feel better knowing that Tony had a doctor within a few feet of him, but realistically she couldn't expect him to be there round the clock.

She'd floated some faintly hopeful talk of dialing back the drugs a little, but Bruce had looked at her with such alarm that she didn't bring it up twice. She didn't feel as though Tony was through the worst of anything. Things were still horrendous, no matter how often Bruce talked about progress and recovery. She didn't want to think too much about what condition they’d pulled Tony off that ship in, because if this was ‘better’, ‘baseline’ must have been disastrous.

Pepper sat on the back porch, clutching her second espresso of that morning. She hadn’t bothered to change out of her pajamas. By this point Tony was the only one getting regular sponge baths and shaves and clean clothes.
Bruce emerged from inside, looking like death warmed over. He sported greying stubble which aged him horribly, standing there in the doorway and blinking at the morning sun. He shifted his weight from foot to foot as he fiddled with his glasses.

“I’m sorry,” he announced by way of an opener.

Instantly she feared for the worst. Tony was dead, had stopped breathing from the latest dose of sedatives, had maybe choked on his own vomit because Pepper had taken ten minutes to have a coffee.

She was on her feet before Bruce had time to sound the all-clear, and he had to physically stop her from storming the fort to evaluate Tony’s condition herself.

“He’s fine. He’s sleeping,” Bruce said. There was an unspoken relief at those four words.

“What’s wrong then?”

She didn’t want to be testy, but she couldn’t help it. They were a week in and he still hadn’t told her what had landed Tony in the wheelchair.

“I don’t know what this is all about,” she said angrily. “I get that there’s a secrecy clause and that’s why Jim’s not returning my calls. But you can’t seriously expect things to go on this way. Is that why you keep Tony drugged like a zombie? So he can’t tell me either? I’ve signed all the NDAs, Bruce. This is absurd!”

She expected some form of protest, any reaction that wasn’t that dull stare she was now so used to from Tony.

“You won’t be able to reach Rhodes,” Bruce said. “He’s dead.”

Blood rushed through her ears like a torrent. She couldn't tell where it ended and the sound of the waves began. Those words made no sense at all. James Rhodes had nothing to do in a sentence that proclaimed him a dead man.

The balcony decking spun underneath her feet. Her legs gave out like a newborn deer’s. Bruce knelt by her side, had her shoulders in a stable grip. She wanted to swat at him, to make him let go. Jim wasn’t dead. Jim couldn’t be dead.

“Liar!” she said, even though he’d already told her on day one: James Rhodes had been part of Tony’s rescue team.

Bruce guided her back into the chair.

“He’s not dead,” she insisted. “He’s on army business. War Machine business.”

“He didn’t make it back, Pepper. I should have told you sooner. I’m sorry.”

She didn’t bother smoothing the edge out of her voice then. “Damn right you should have told me! You can tell me now. Talk.”

“I will. I’m sorry. Are you ok?”

That was far out. She waved him off. No more procrastination.

“Just do it. Start to finish.”
“Ok,” he said, as though grasping for the right thread. “Ok.”

She thought he’d phrase it as a slow build, that she’d have to worm every other word out of him, but once the floodgates opened there was hardly a way of slowing him down. He rushed her through horrors with unstoppable drive, faster than Pepper could generate images to go along with his narrative.

Tony, wrapped in alien skin. Tony, feral, hallucinating, forced to his knees by the demons of his own mind. Tony’s building nervous breakdown, and how he began to come away at the edges. Bruce told her about Natasha's EMP, and how Steve had done a one-man World War II reenactment while they’d all been holed up in a small room. Then Jarvis’ loss. Tony crashing.

“Stop me if you need to ask questions,” Bruce said and began pacing the balcony. “It gets worse from here.”

Wasn’t it bad enough already? But no, she thought. There was a gigantic difference between the Tony Bruce depicted, and the Tony lying drugged in his sick room. The Tony in this story was mobile, capable, toughing it out.

What had happened to him to change that?

Bruce wanted her to ask questions. She tried to figure out which questions she could stomach the answers for. Almost jittery, she touched her left forearm. It was the most obvious of Tony’s sacrifices for survival.

Bruce stared at the decking. “Like I said, that's an old injury.”

“And the other one?”

“That one’s on Steve.”

“On Steve? Rogers?”

“Yeah. He broke it.”

“He broke Tony’s arm?”

She felt like a parrot repeating everything he said.

Bruce launched into another explanation. The Leviathan, Steve's erratic behavior, his subsequent removal from command. Tony's frame of mind hitting rock bottom without Jarvis and Iron Man. Jim knocking Tony out from sheer unwilling necessity.

“Water?” Bruce offered. “I’m not going to bail on you this time, but things are about to get really bad, and my throat’s gone a little dry from all the talking.”

Pepper shook her head. He brought her a glass from the kitchen anyway. Maybe he thought that she’d need it once they were through.

“What happened next?” she asked. She felt like a kid in the backseat of a car, roasting the grown-ups with relentless are-we-there-yets.

“Nat and Rhodes died.”

“Natasha Romanoff is dead?” Her eyes widened, but that was as much as she could afford to react. Natasha’s death was one more horror in a sea of horrors.
“We were attacked. Everything was loose by that point,” he explained. Natasha had died. He’d lost control. There had been an ‘incident’ of the green variety.

Pepper restrained herself from calling Nick Fury right on the spot to demand what the hell he was thinking, sending her to an island with a crippled Tony Stark, her only support a man who’d recently turned into a rampaging monster. She wasn’t sure if Bruce had given up on sparing her feelings, or if he was just too exhausted for tact. He sure wasn’t pulling his punches walking her through Tony’s condition in the med bay.

Then the worst part. Jim.

There were no last words, no heroic death, nothing for her to cling on to, or offer to Tony as a source of comfort later. He’d been decapitated, end of story. A life snuffed out in seconds. Short, brutal, ugly.

And yet still, none of this explained Tony's current physical state. Bruce hesitated. She wanted to say ‘come on’, ‘get it over with’, but that felt like spitting on Jim’s grave.

Then he let the cat out of the bag. Tony in War Machine, losing his goddamn mind. Unhinged, unrestrained, unstoppable. It had been a miracle, she realized, that they’d gotten him onto that shuttle at all.

“So that’s what happened,” Bruce said quietly, hands folded in his lap, as though he hadn’t just chucked an atomic bomb at her.

She didn’t know what she needed right now, but she knew that it wasn’t Bruce hovering and fretting beside her. “Go and get some sleep or something,” she told him. “You look like you’ve had a long night.”

“If you have any questions—”

“I will,” she said curtly. “Thanks.”

As soon as he was gone, she leaned over the table and put her face in her hands. She didn’t know how long she stayed that way. Not all too long, probably. She didn’t like leaving Tony unsupervised, especially not right after a morphine shot.

Taking up her end of the vigil she replayed Bruce’s story before her mind’s eye. Even if his heart had been in the right place, she found it insultingly paternalistic that Bruce hadn't come to her in the first place. That’s what she had him employed for, for crying out loud! If Stark Industries had been heading up the mission instead of SHIELD things might have gone drastically different.

Or maybe not.

Maybe the shadowy government agency would have tied her up so hard in red tape that it would have gone exactly the same way, except that she'd have been sat on Earth wondering and waiting instead of ignorantly minding her business. Jim had obviously agreed with keeping her in the dark, and he could usually be trusted with these things.

Could usually have been. Past tense modal.

She thought of how Jim used to talk sense into Tony the way nobody else could and how, in his more serious moments, Tony had told her how he'd been all set to drop out in his freshman semester at MIT until he’d made his first real friend.
She thought about after too, how she'd clutched onto Jim's arm at Tony's funeral. He'd stood there, straight backed and rigid, and subtly supported her weight so that she didn't collapse during the service. She wondered if his mother knew yet, and whether there would be a funeral, and if someone had the key to his apartment to feed his goldfish.

Then she looked at Tony, and wondered how in the hell either of them were going to cope in a world without James Rhodes.

The conversation with Pepper had gone about as well as could be expected. He couldn’t see a reason for Fury’s decision to keep Pepper so markedly uninformed when it was inevitable for her to glean knowledge one way or another. Maybe leaving it to Bruce to break the news was a twisted ‘you made your bed, now lie in it’ gesture on Fury’s part. Bruce wouldn't put it past him. The man had been fit to be tied after that phone call.

He hadn't liked the greedy way that Fury had been looking at Jarvis’ chip, all the secrecy surrounding it. But who else was there to turn to besides Pepper? Steve was out of the picture, and even if he was willing to help, he lacked the means to do so. Not so Pepper. She had the power, and Bruce had given her the right incentive as fuel. Gears could be set into motion awfully fast if just the right person snapped their fingers.

Despite a lot of initial threats Fury didn’t lock him up for life and beyond. Bruce got his share of yelling and condemnation, but in the end Maria came to him with a carefully drafted deal. Part of the bargain entailed acting as Tony’s personal physician, and he suspected that was going to be a punishment in and of itself. The rest he didn’t know what to think about. He supposed he’d deal with it when the time came.

Presently there was another issue to be dealt with: Pepper’s wrath. He’d given her as much space as he possibly could, but she’d set up camp in Tony’s room and there was only so long Bruce could circumvent that place.

He knocked politely, popping his head around the door. Pepper sat in the armchair, papers and folders spread out across her lap and on the floor in front of her.

She pre-empted the question. “I was getting caught up. Tony's medical files.”

“It’s a sensible thing to do,” he said. She relaxed a little, seemed slightly less on the defensive. But she didn't have any effusive words of thanks this time, not after Bruce had handed her a poisoned chalice in the form of a patient who needed 24/7 care.

He hesitated.

“I could apologize until the sun burns out,” he said. “And I probably should, but it won’t help Tony’s case. I called you because I thought — still think — that you’re his best chance at making some semblance of recovery.”

Pepper put down the page she was reading. “I’m not mad about you calling me, Bruce. I’m mad about the communication gaps. I need to know what I’m dealing with if you want Tony’s best chance to be anything more than reactive decisions. I realize there’s no way to get access into his head,” she said. “But I need you to drop the ‘Keep Out’ signs if we’re supposed to play on the same team.”

“No more secrets,” he said, but knew it was a promise he wasn’t likely able to keep.

“What’s the raff about...?” came a slurred voice from the bed. Tony peeked one eye open, his
expression foggy.

“Hey,” said Pepper in a much calmer tone than she’d used with Bruce.

“Crisis meeting? That bad?” asked Tony. He looked from Pepper to Bruce. “What’d I do this time?”

“We’re just gossiping about you,” Bruce offered.

“You’re kind of a big deal around here,” Pepper said. “And I know how you love being the center of attention.”

Tony looked down at the IV line snaking out of him. “It's really swell. All my sexy nurse fantasies come to life.”

“I really hope,” Bruce said, “that that was directed at Pepper only.”

That garnered a hoarse laugh, which (predictably) cut off into a painful bout of coughing. Seven broken ribs and a shattered breastbone were nothing to laugh about — or with — and Tony had yet to ingrain that wisdom.

“Actually,” started Pepper once Tony had rebooted his lungs. “There’s something we need to talk about.”

“Me?” offered Tony innocently.

Pepper put a hand on his arm. “Practically speaking, I still have a company to run. Your company. It's going to cause problems if I just drop off the face of the planet.”

“Yeah. Been there, done that,” Tony said. “Don't recommend it.”

“I hadn't expected you to be here indefinitely,” Bruce said. “I mean, I expected that you'd probably want to. But I hadn't expected it to be possible.”

“Anything’s possible, Bruce,” Tony argued after taking a sip from the water Pepper held up for him. “I said my odds weren’t even worth totin’ up. And here I am, lively as a cricket.”

Bruce nodded courteously at what couldn’t have been anything besides an attempt at a joke. Because one didn't amputate their own arm and walked away from that with a cheerful bounce in their step. Especially not if they were Tony Stark, an engineer who created amazing things with his hands, whose manual dexterity and ability to build and shape and form was such a huge part of his identity. What must that be doing to him now, to be unable to even use a knife and fork?

“But you'll be here? All the time?”

Bruce blinked. He hadn’t realized Pepper was talking to him. He nodded.

“You don't mind?”

“Of course he doesn’t.” Tony was far less punctilious when it came to whether or not he was an imposition. “I'm a delight. Besides, the doc signed up for this.”

Bruce smiled wanly. That wasn't strictly true. Although he supposed he'd been asking for it the moment he picked up the phone and incurred Nick Fury’s wrath in the process. But he didn't mind, that part was genuine. “You should do what you have to do,” he told Pepper. “As far as the company is concerned, I mean. I'm guessing you can probably pass off the first few weeks as a well earned vacation though.”
“And after that I can work 'business trips' into my schedule that nobody should look too closely into. I can be here regularly, just not... all the time.” She looked torn at the idea.

“It's all good from my end, babe.” Tony seemed more mellow than Bruce had seen him in a while. He wondered if that was a good titration of drug doses or if Tony was genuinely just starting to settle. “You know it's only until I'm camera ready.”

Bruce wondered if that was what Tony really thought. That all of this was about keeping him out of the public eye so that he could make a full recovery and a spectacular comeback, that SHIELD were just acting out of concern for his PR image.

It was a nice thought.

Chapter End Notes

Please feed the fish, mom.

The story continues at a slow-moving speed for Tony, but don't you misconstrue Fury's benevolence. SHIELD's still very much in the game.

We've got a couple more chapters to go, so enjoy these calm waters as long as they last.
As the days passed it became more and more apparent that the man she’d picked up from a clandestine SHIELD facility wasn’t the same one she’d watched barreling through an alien portal.

Tony was out of bed for extended periods of time now, but not in a fit state to do much else besides sit on the couch or in his wheelchair, and even that tired him out very quickly.

Pepper had taken him outside on a couple of occasions, back out on the patio that was handicap accessible. They’d sit there on pleasant mid-afternoons after the sun had passed its zenith, him with his brimmed hat and shades and pretending to sip a dirty Colada instead of his bland nutri-shake, and her laughing and remembering better days. Other times they’d sit in silence, him with his IV stand of opiates and overnight stubble and not a hint of pretense of how badly he was hurting, and her glum and out of fortitude to think past a bleak tomorrow.

Reality was that Tony had slowed from Mach Six to stagnant, and it was a painful metamorphosis to watch. Pepper told herself it was the extensive list of injuries, the cocktail of medication, the physical exertion of all that he’d been through. She found herself investing as much time into cataloguing Tony’s transformation as creating excuses for all the patterns that didn’t suit the image of him that she had etched to memory. It was like trying to squeeze a rectangular block through a round hole on a Sort It Out toy. When she realized what she was doing she felt frustrated and ashamed; and still secretly blamed the wood block for bad fit.

Through the years she’d played Sort It Out with Tony on all known difficulty levels. It was a harsh awareness that overcame her now. If she wanted to keep playing the game, she’d have to carve a new slot for this altered shape that Tony had made himself into instead of keeping up a stubborn insistence for her old ways.

Patience seemed to be Bruce Banner’s mantra on the topic.

Since their arrival they had spent more time watching TV than Pepper ever had in the last decade. It had become the default group activity, with Tony having years of ‘culture’ to catch up on and no other option to do so but by staring at trash on the box.

Bruce was usually politely sat in an armchair, although he’d started spending longer and longer in the kitchen under the guise of meal prep. Pepper suspected he genuinely preferred sorting through cans of baby food rather than binge-watching hours worth of Game of Thrones, especially when Tony, for all his purported enthusiasm, kept frequently falling asleep and she’d have to rewind the parts he missed while he tried to orientate himself over who was backstabbing who.

It was an odd sort of limbo. Pepper thought with dread of her impending deadline, when she’d have to step on a jet and resume her day-to-day duties as SI’s CEO while Tony continued his painstakingly slow recuperation under SHIELD’s watchful eye.

“Hey, wait. Flip back. What’s that?”

Late morning channel hopping wasn’t anything out of the ordinary, and usually Tony would be dozing profoundly halfway through the second sales ad on the shopping channel. Pepper didn’t know whether to be glad or worried that he was so jazzed today.
She grabbed the remote out of Bruce’s hand with more vigor than was probably needed.

“It’s nothing,” she said, and purposely flipped on ahead. “We don’t have to watch that.”

She knew fine well what Tony had glimpsed, if only because she’d watched it herself more times than was healthy: BBC’s classic on the Chitauri invasion, ‘SuperHeroes, SuperWars’.

And that was the last thing Tony needed, a french kiss of upsetting nostalgia. She’d witnessed first hand what the wrong word or touch or a smell out of place could do to him. She’d only been present during one anxiety attack, but Bruce had told her about other incidents, prevalent during his night-shifts. When Tony hit the panic button he hit it good and hard, and not in a way that would pass with deep breaths and a slow count to ten.

They could all do without a supplemental performance.

“Hey,” said Tony again, and then, “No.” He pulled himself up straighter on the couch. “Go back to that. I want to see that.”

It was the most firm he’d been about something other than his sleep medicine.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea,” said Bruce. He looked at Tony like he thought it was, in fact, a most terrible idea but was too diplomatic to say so outright.

“It’s about Manhattan,” added Pepper. “It could trigger you.”

They were meticulously avoiding exposing him to any provocative material. Any and all talks concerning the portal and its aftermath were initiated by Tony and tended to accumulate when drug levels were elevated and inhibition was low. He rarely broached the subject when he was lucid and when he did he tended to be so forcefully casual about it that it struck a wrong chord and sounded like a bad take at gallows humor.

“I’ll cope,” Tony said.

Pepper employed a tight smile. She glanced at Bruce. Should she pull the plug on this?

“If you get upset, if you want to stop—"

“I’ve seen worse than PG, Pep. Just put it on.”

Against her better judgement she relented. The action was well underway on TV. They’d missed the beginning, the only part Iron Man featured in. Tony looked balked at the discovery, but Pepper preferred it that way. She’d watched him flit through that wormhole often enough.

“That’s not NYC,” deducted Tony quickly. In this timeline the Chitauri had already made tracks into the heartland.

There was a brief segment about Loki’s execution, in which they tastefully refrained from showing the explicit content. Just the start, him being led up onto the platform in an orange jumpsuit, with shots of Thor and the paterfamilias, a greying man with eye clasp and ceremonial get-up, standing wordlessly to the side.

Then it cut to reactions from various news outlets around the world, a mix of positive and negative over the decision to impose the death penalty on an alien being and its repercussions on the coexistence between Asgard and Earth. Personally Pepper thought that was null and void. They’d never heard from Thor again after his brother’s head had rolled.
Although she was against judicial murder in principle, she had found it hard to muster up a sense of clemency for the man who’d been responsible for Tony’s death. In hindsight she regretted that Stark Industries hadn’t taken a stronger position on the matter, but shareholders had been vehemently against getting involved while public sentiment ran so high and so polarized.

“Tony, what’s that?”

To her surprise Bruce perked up and pointed to some contraption in the background of a shot following the Chitauri’s brutal sweep across the Midwest.

“I saw one on board the ship too. SHIELD believed it was a comms device, but I always thought it was part of something bigger.”

“Comms? Bollocks. That’s the interface control,” Tony said, snorting derisively, and Pepper found herself smiling. That was the old Tony right there, rubbing his supremacy in everyone’s face. He commenced to explain in assiduous detail how it was basically a joystick for space whales, and how he’d cracked its code with nothing but his own ingenuity and (just a hint of) aid from Jarvis.

Bruce looked faintly amused, unlike Pepper who fought hard not to flinch when Tony unveiled that he had been planning to ride into New York on the back of one of the same creatures that had killed countless civilians. She couldn’t tell how much sobriety hid behind the idea, but Tony looked pleased enough with himself and continued to reprimand several scientific assertions made by interviewees with a barrage of well deserved titles to their names.

On screen the war persisted, a relentless westward trend. They were four months in now.

“I had an epic beard by that point,” Tony said. He took to the documentary a lot better than Pepper had expected. She let some of the tension ebb away, indulging him.

“You went full lumberjack?” It was hard picturing him with anything more but a week’s growth, much less several months’.

Tony looked proud of the feat. “I was king of the bongo. I rocked that look. And I had bigger things to deal with than trying not to cut my own throat with dry shaves. Fort Stark was in the fledgling stage.”

“Fort Stark?” she asked, puzzled.

“Tony’s hideaway,” Bruce supplemented, and after a little pause added, “It was actually really cool.”

She wasn’t sure if he meant that, or if he was just trying to keep the conversation as upbeat as possible.

“It wasn’t cool,” Tony corrected. “It was legendary. The apocryphal man cave.”

The documentary cut to a segment about the survivors and the rebuilding effort, but at this point it was background noise to Pepper. This was the first time Tony offered up information at this rate and at such a loquacious pace. She found it extremely hard to strike a balance between taking it gently and soaking up the what’s what of his time on the ship.

“What did you do?” she blurted out. “Day to day, I mean. Before you started the, uh, ‘cycles’?”

Tony’s attention was momentarily piqued by Steve dominating the screen, resplendent in a clean uniform while showing off his serum enhanced strength by lifting a large girder from the rubble. Tattered applause came from the gathered public. Tony rolled his eyes.
She asked again, gaining no answer. The docudrama continued, but Tony seemed to be stuck in the moment. She put a hand on his thigh. He blinked.

“What?”

“I said what did you do apart from building your pillow fort?”

He hesitated, as though the question was a trap. Then he said, “I searched for my shoes.”

“You looked for your shoes for four years?” Pepper asked. She was sure he hadn’t, but he was angling off.

“No,” Tony said. “I found them. They weren’t with my other things though. Don’t know what the xenos wanted with them. Weren’t even Limited, just plain old trainers. Maybe they had a shoe kink.”

Somehow Pepper doubted the Chitauri onslaught could have been stopped by a sacrificial offering of Louboutins. She made a sign for Tony to continue. They were getting hung up in frivolities.

“So I settled down,” Tony said. “In Fort Stark. It was a one man reign. No rules, no dues, no drama.” In afterthought he added, “The chow was miserable though. Wouldn’t have fed it to the pigs.”

“That really was the worst thing I’ve ever tasted,” Bruce agreed.

It annoyed Pepper, and irrationally so, that Bruce knew more than she did about the conditions that Tony had survived in. He’d witnessed this side to Tony’s life that she would never be able to relate to.

“There was worse,” Tony assured. She didn’t doubt that. “Anyway,” he said, clearing his throat. “I slept lots. Ate little. It was dull. Really boring. Not a lot to do when you got to go on waiting, you know.”

“Waiting?”


This took her aback. She’d watched him go out in the middle of a battle and seen him come home like he’d just lived through one. She’d gotten used to this mental picture of Tony being embroiled in non-stop trauma. The day to day monotony of survival and solitude was something that she hadn’t contemplated at all.

She thought of someone like Tony, someone who needed to be constantly occupied, whose mind was always racing at a hundred miles an hour. She thought of what taking a person like that and putting them in enforced isolation would do to them.

“I’m glad you had your suit at least,” she said. “I’m glad you had Jarvis.”

Tony was yet to touch the little chip they’d bailed out of Fury’s possession. He hadn’t as much as asked about Jarvis’ main version which he’d left to Pepper, either. She found that more than odd.

“J was a good bud,” Tony said, more somber this time. “I don’t know. It was all a big blur. Maybe BBC will do a special on me too. ‘Space Oddity’ they’ll call it, like that David Bowie song. It’ll play while the credits roll. And I’ll look much better than Captain A-Hole did in his biopic.”

She was about to steer the conversation away from less fraught territory when Bruce suddenly piped
“What will you do about the ship?” he asked. “Are you going to let SHIELD have it? Their tech staff are mostly idiots, you know that.”

Tony hesitated, then shrugged his shoulders. “Dunno.”

“You’ll give it up without a fight?” asked Pepper. It was the best decision to be had, to put old ghosts to rest, but it sounded unlike anything Tony would willingly do.

“I’ll put up the fight of fights,” assured Tony. “Somehow. I haven’t thought about it yet. Maybe part of Jarv’s still in there, a ghost in the shell. He’d lock the front doors if SHIELD came knocking, put up a CLOSED sign. Keep all the juicy bits for me.”

“Ok...” Bruce looked positively faithless. “Do you have a backup plan, just in case?”

Something in Tony’s demeanor changed. It was like watching a solar eclipse — for a moment there was no light to him at all. “There’s dirty ways to fight,” he said. “There’s very little I wouldn’t do to get what I want.”

“We'll get it back,” she said quickly, to pacify him. “We can come to an arrangement or failing that, I'm sure there's a legal precedent about maritime scavenging that we can argue applies to spaceships. We have the best lawyers in the world. SHIELD will end up capitulating one way or another.”

That seemed to take the edge off. Tony smiled, and it was as if nothing had happened.

Bruce opened his mouth to ask something else, but Pepper cut him off firmly. They were low enough in the hole. It was time to climb out of it, not see how much deeper it went.

“But that's a problem for another day,” she decided. “All of it. Your comeback, the media, the ship, it can wait.”

“Swell,” Tony said with a grin. “Procrastinating is my favorite hobby too.”

What couldn’t wait was a multi billion dollar company. Nobody expected Stark Industries to perform without a tight lead, and three weeks into her absence the first signs of fallout began to show. Frictions among the board members, a stagnating stock index, her mailbox bursting at the seams like a warehouse in the port of Shanghai.

Pepper was forced to pull the brakes on her sabbatical a week later.

Tony, for all his factitious understanding of the matter, took to her departure with an almost despondent temperament. He blamed it on the weather, but she knew there was something else, some underlying cryptid that Tony presupposed she should be able to read off his lips, but couldn’t.

The farewell was correspondingly stale; they saw her off at the front door, Bruce pushing Tony’s wheelchair, with Tony sitting there mellowed out by an unplanned dose of analgesics after a particularly restless night.

She kissed him on the forehead, thinking to herself that hopefully the clamminess wasn’t a precursor to some opportunistic infection he’d picked up.

She spent most of that first trip in a state of perpetual anxiety. The company business was waved through with superficial interest; there were deals to sign, provocateurs to be put in place, and for the
first time in years Pepper found herself addressing these concerns with someone else’s best interests in mind rather than her own.

At the back of the stage she tended to the issues of substance. She broke her oath to Fury and updated Jarvis on Tony’s condition. She put him on a hunt for information: physiotherapy, psychiatry, prosthetics programs. How to deal with prisoners of war, from a relatives’ perspective. Refeeding after near starvation. Compassion fatigue.

Her calls to the island (through a SHIELD vetted connection) were patiently borne at first but eventually led to Bruce sitting her down for a Come-To-Jesus talk where he lectured her on the importance of not letting this take over her life. She assumed he was at least partly fed up of constantly answering the phone and having to repeat himself on the statement that Tony was nowhere near the brink of death.

Being away had one advantage though. It was easier to see the jumps in Tony's progress.

When she returned two weeks later nothing was left of the inquietude of her departure. Tony greeted her like she’d merely retired for the night. He was delighted about an old band t-shirt she’d grubbed out of a ‘Tony’ labeled cardboard box dusting away in the Malibu garage. He spent the whole day in the wheelchair without needing to go to bed once.

It wasn’t to say that he was ok — that was still a long way off, and not even Tony fooled himself into thinking otherwise — but here and there a hint of his old self flickered through and they all held on to it like a lighthouse in the storm.

Bruce began to look less frazzled too. There was no working around Tony pouting and mocking Bruce’s incessantly over-cautious nature, or Bruce internalizing a semi-perpetual air of exasperation when it came to Tony's caprices, but him and Tony eased into a routine that seemed to be acceptable for both sides. If nothing else they were on the same wavelength as far as lengthy, drawn out scientific discussions went. Which was a blessing, because it meant that Tony could get them all out of his system without her having to nod politely through his treaties.

The first substantial breakthrough came after Tony harangued Bruce into removing his cast a few days ahead of schedule. Regaining the use of his right hand helped enormously with both his ability to care for himself and his self esteem. Pepper wasn’t there to witness the act itself, but when she arrived on site days later Tony was waiting on the front porch, standing on thin, spindly legs instead of being sat in his wheelchair. He wore his trademark Vandyke instead of the prosaic week old beard he’d favored so far.

“What do I owe the honor to?” she asked as they hugged. He felt slightly less skeletal, but she’d have to talk to Bruce about the diet. They were pushing the two month mark and Tony still looked like he was ready to check into an anorexia clinic.

Tony proudly showed her his cast-less right arm. He wore a supportive wrist brace in its stead, but it was far less bulky than the cast had been. “I’ll do one armed pushups in no time,” he said.

“I’m sure you will,” she agreed. Who was she to deny him such fancy?

It turned out that the walking part, at this stage at least, was merely for bragging rights. Tony accompanied her to the couch, where he found something that garnered his attention and demanded him taking a break sitting down. He stayed there for a while.

When she quizzed Bruce about it later he filled her in on the facts: Tony was up to short bursts of footwork, but his cardiovascular system was still lagging behind, which was nothing if not
predictable considering all he’d been through. A much bigger crux, Bruce admitted, was Tony’s assessment of his personal limits, which bordered on asinine. They’d make much steadier progress if the modus operandi weren’t one step forward, three steps back.

“And please don’t pander to his whim about replacing the infirmary with a personal gym,” Bruce pleaded. “The only iron he needs to pump is the one in his supplemental IV feed.”

It was her next visit to the island that marked an explicit shift.

She noticed it when she parked her valise in the master bedroom. The blanket was rumpled and the blinds on the windows were still all pulled down to their sills, despite her habit of leaving the room tidied up. In the en suite a second toothbrush had slipped in next to hers. Tony’s shaver lay on the sink tray. She didn’t say anything about it.

Come evening Pepper retreated to the bedroom early, if only to give rein to whatever game plan Tony had in mind other than fighting a losing battle against his own eyelids on the couch. He was on a lot more than his usual amount of sleeping aid that night. Bruce called it an experimental variation in dosage, but Pepper thought it was just a ballooned synonym for a safety brake. She stepped into bed with a queasy apprehension. Tony appeared minutes later, hovering unsteadily in the doorway. He was leaning on his cane.

“Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” she said.

It was awkward. He was too drowsy to be charming.

“Scoot over,” he said. She put the laptop away, made space for him. He didn’t go for his customary side, crawling in to her left instead. He propped himself up against the pillow, pulling the blanket up to his waist. The glow of his reactor highlighted the too sharp contours of his face and the perpetual rings under his eyes. God, would he ever lose those, she wondered?

“I got fed up with bumping into the side rails on mine,” Tony offered as an explanation. “This one’s much comfier. Bigger. The mattress is firmer too.”

“And you’re there, physically?” she asked. “Sharing a bed?” She didn’t want to accidentally hurt him. Or get hurt herself.

“Yes, I think so. But only on double sleepies, the doc says. And only if you promise not to take drooling blackmail pictures of me.” He didn’t sound convinced. The humor was strained.

“I won’t,” she promised. Tony lay there like he was wedged into a coffin rather than reclined in a Texas King size. Tentatively she reached out, twining her pinkie finger with his, a tiny move that somehow felt huge.

“This is okay?” she asked.

Another of those long smothering pauses. She squeezed again, and this time he returned the gesture.

“Sorry,” he said. “It’s okay, yeah. It’s good. I’m just really groggy.”

“You’ve had a long day,” she agreed in curbed sympathy. It was hard to keep the disappointment from her voice. She’d put more hope into this than Tony lying punch drunk next to her, reeking of that faint antiseptic-and-sickness smell that seemed to follow him everywhere. It was unfair to demand more than he was capable of giving, but she longed for a twinkle of normalcy like a fish
longed for water. She could never be sure where she stood with this variant of Tony. He probably didn’t even know it himself.

Like she was scared of breaking the spell she leaned forward carefully and ran one finger from the line of his jaw and down his neck, watching the way the tiny hairs stood up under her touch.

Tony took the cue. She didn’t know if it felt the way it did because he was dopey or because she’d perverted the memory of them into some sort of delusional fantasy. He leaned in as much as he could and she covered the rest of the distance. It was a short kiss, no tongue. A mouth clamped over hers, lips as dry and dead as strips of salted leather, the touch of stubble against smooth skin. She felt his arm on her waist and felt it withdraw as soon as he’d touched her; it had been his left arm.

Tony pulled back. She smelled him on the outrush of breath, a mixed stench of sauce bolognaise and the sweet, sulphur-like whiff of pharmaceutics.

It was the first real kiss they’d shared in over four years. When he asked why she was crying, she said she was just happy to have him back and that she had missed him and that she loved him. She didn’t tell him how she thought that he tasted like a corpse.

Chapter End Notes

Tony’s rehab is going... well, it's going. And that's as well as can be expected.

Meanwhile, on BBC2:
Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Part of the problem was that not one of the three of them was about to get a clean bill of mental health, but Tony was so beyond not ok that Pepper's neuroses and Bruce's post-mission traumas took a back seat to his myriad of issues.

Tony's mental state was essentially a crapshoot.

He seemed to be determined to keep it together when Pepper was around, like he had some ideal that he wanted to live up to when she was there. It was good to an extent, gave him a focal point, although it meant that he was often drained by the time she left, all of his attempts at charm and concentration leaving him spent and exhausted. Sometimes he didn't get out of bed at all the next day.

When Pepper was away Tony was prone to sink to darker places.

There were the night terrors and the panic attacks, the 3am wake ups when he was hollering down the house and pleading with Bruce to 'do something, anything!' when the only thing to do was sedate him out of his nightmares.

Conversely all Bruce ever heard from Pepper was that she wanted Tony on less medication, that he was too drugged up and that Bruce had to start dialing it back if they ever wanted to get Tony off the island. Personally Bruce thought that any way off the island had to include an elephant dose of benzos. It was only under that condition that he’d even given the green light on Tony’s move into the master bedroom. Everything else would have been irresponsible in regards to Pepper.

That wasn’t to say that Tony only jumped from bad to worse. He had great days too, the sort of days where Bruce felt less like Tony's appointed carer and more like they were just hanging out. While Tony continued to evade a more detailed recollection of his time in space, he was willing enough to share tidbits on the science front. He’d sketch crude schematics from memory and they’d bounce ideas off one another in between Tony’s TV marathons.

Of these Bruce would cherry pick a selection to forward to SHIELD alongside the weekly med reports. After all Fury hadn’t agreed to let him go with the sole purpose of helping Tony Stark build therapeutic sand castles on the beach. As was the case with every under-the-table handshake, there were certain conditions on Bruce’s end to uphold. To this day he had yet to coax Tony into a dialogue about Jarvis, although he wasn’t too mournful about the procrastination. Handing the AI out on a silver platter was the last thing he wanted to do, especially if it meant playing straight into Fury’s cards.

Along with other directives SHIELD had recently sent out new drug calibration protocol; which wasn’t exactly working out in Tony’s favor. He’d go from losing his shit to refusing to accept that he wasn’t scheduled for another sleep cycle on some mornings. Other times, more frequently, Bruce would have to beg with him to try to complete his physio exercises while Tony stared blankly at the walls, spouting listless nihilism.

Occasionally he'd make passing references about Pepper too, the kind of allegations that were borne from a paranoia Bruce had first noticed on the ship. How her trips away from the island were more than business. How she was out there doing the dirty while Tony was stuck on house arrest. There
was a sharp edge to his tone when he hinted at that, the sort of edge which told Bruce that it would be an excellent time to back out of the conversation, maybe bring his meds forward by an hour before he worked himself up too much. But drugging all the negative emotions out of him wasn't a long-term strategy and it felt like a betrayal, if not of who he was now then certainly of who he used to be.

The worst part was when they were doing innocuous small talk and Tony would interject with a completely horrific anecdote from the ship. Sometimes it would be the parabolic arc that Rhodes’ head had made, or a throwaway remark on how the Chitauri had tried to prise the arc reactor from his chest. It was during a Tuesday dinner that Tony dropped such a bombshell on him. He was eating mashed something-or-other when he shot Bruce a parody of what had probably been his ‘turn on the charm’ smile at one time.

“Cthulhu,” he said. “I baited it.”

“What?” Bruce asked. He was unfamiliar with this particular term of Tony-speak. “Chu-what?”

“Cthulhu. The bossman.”

Bruce choked on a mouthful. “The squid?”

Tony raised a brow at the denotation. “A squid? I guess so. Yes. The big one. At the very end.”

“What about it? You baited it? To get away?”

“No. I baited it to follow me.”

Bruce stared.

“You what?”

“I didn’t think we should get to go home, you know,” Tony said. “Not if Rhodey wasn’t. So I made it follow me. To the shuttle.”

“To us?”

“Yeah. Yeah, I guess I really wanted to snuff us all out.” He laughed. "Understandable. Don’t you think?"

Those were the moments Bruce was most glad that Pepper wasn't around for.

He lay awake, staring at the ceiling. The digital clock read 2:16 AM. He had followed its minutely lapse for the better part of an hour now. It was stifling hot under the covers. That was why he couldn’t sleep. It had nothing to do with the fact that the Chitauri ship was waiting for him behind his eyelids.

He thought he heard some rustling sounds, maybe Tony getting up to use the bathroom. Then he heard the thump of cupboard doors being opened and rolled his eyes.

Of-fucking-course Tony had decided, once again, to circumvent his meticulously planned recovery diet and was probably at this very moment eyeball deep in junk food and Mountain Dew, a near guarantee that Bruce would be cleaning up sick tomorrow morning.
Sighing, he got out of bed, pulled on a t-shirt and padded barefoot towards the kitchen. He was unsure if he was going with the intention of reprimanding Tony, or to just plead with him to stop making Bruce’s job so damn difficult. He was an awful patient at the best of times.

“Now come on...” he muttered as he walked in on the mise en scene.

Tony was sat cross legged on the floor, surrounded by what looked like half the contents of the pantry and sheets of paper which were covered in haphazard tables. He was jotting down numbers by the light of the open refrigerator.

“What are you up to?” Bruce said in his best attempt at casual.

Tony craned his neck, seemingly debating on whether to reply at all. There was a sheen of sweat to his forehead and a slightly glazed-over look about his eyes.

“Can you move?” Tony said. “I can’t see what I’m doing.”

Bruce shifted a pile of tinned soup out of the way with his foot. He took a seat next to Tony. They stayed like that for a while, Bruce watching Tony work in a sort of companionable silence. He seemed to be making an inventory, scribbling nutritional information into messy columns.

“We can order more,” Bruce prompted. “Food, that is. It's not a finite resource here.”

Tony didn’t look up from his calculations. “I didn’t have the option of ordering in. I just want to see if I could have gotten by, ok?”

So they were dealing with a retrospective rather than a prospective hypothetical exercise. Bruce took one of the notes, going over Tony’s numbers. Something tightened in his chest as he kept reading. He thought of malnourished street children, of families who'd shared what they had in exchange for medical services, even when every last grain of rice counted. Then he looked at Tony Stark, a child of unimaginable privilege, a man who'd literally had a private island bought for him for the sole purpose of facilitating his recovery in comfort and he saw that same panic, that same gnawing fear of scarcity that he'd seen in the faces of some of the poorest people in the world.

Bruce began passing him tins. Whatever he was doing with this, it seemed important to him to work through. Tony had him read out the nutritional info so he could keep writing without interruption. Sometimes he disagreed or claimed that the contents of the package couldn’t be appropriately divided for the number of days he had them planned out for. Bruce didn’t contradict him too much as he worked, cutting calories here and there and getting increasingly frustrated at the outlook of this experiment.

The end was predictable, but nonetheless Tony looked genuinely dismayed facing his results. “It wouldn’t be better this way, it’d be worse,” he said. “I can't stretch it, not over so long, not if I only ate every other day.” He took the page he was working on and crumpled it up into a ball. “I'm down to four hundred a day.”

“That's not sustainable,” Bruce said redundantly.

He indulged Tony for a little while longer until they'd more or less accounted for every scrap in the kitchen. It was still unclear where Tony was going with this, if he was going anywhere at all. The experiment made little sense, unless Tony found a way to reverse time and carry a shopping cart of groceries through the wormhole rather than an atom bomb.

Bruce took the pen out of his hand as gently, but firmly, as he could. “How about I help you put all of this back, you take some Fig Newtons and we both catch some shuteye?”
“I can’t eat any more sludge,” Tony said emphatically.

“You don’t have to. You’re not on the ship anymore.”

Only he was. In his head, sometimes he still was.

“You don’t know what it’s like to live off that stuff,” Tony said. “It’s either shitlock or the runs.” He grabbed fruitlessly for the pen. “I swore off sludge once. A year or so into the trek. Thought if I racked my brains hard enough I’d find a workaround, but that’s crunk Tony to you, believing he can live off sweet air.”

Then it was if someone had opened the tap and words rushed out of Tony’s mouth uncensored. He recounted a movie, a character prying off the sole of his own boot in an attempt to eat it in a moment of desperation. Tony told Bruce how he could relate to that guy and how, once he’d been hungry enough, he’d played with that same thought himself.

“Must have been looking at my shoes for a week straight before I brought up the courage,” he said, “but that week I’d done nothing besides picturing me taking a chew out of those leather soles. By the end of it I wasn’t thinking of leather soles at all, I was thinking of those grass-fed buffalo patties they serve in that joint down the PCH, the one right before the Malibu exit.”

They didn’t usually deliver but Tony used to have the kitchen boy’s number and could get a Cheese or Classic within ten minutes of putting down the receiver, hefty tip included of course. “By the end of that week, Bruce, I’d have put out all my money if somebody as much as let me smell a friggin’ burger, even if it was just one of those run-of-the-mill Micky D’s.

“So I take off my shoes — I try to ignore that smell — and I turn them over so I can get at the seams of the sole. And there comes my first disappointment: no leather to those soles! I don’t let it get at me, try not to at least, and go for the next best thing, the inserts. At that point my stomach isn’t growling anymore either, it’s hollering. ‘Get the double!’ it says, and my brain comes through with every damn burger commercial that ever ran on pay TV. I salivate like Pavlov’s pooch when I finally have my hand round that insole.”

He made a pantomimic gesture of pulling out the insole and turned an invisible copy of it in his hand.

“Most of the branding’s washed out. You can imagine after so long, can’t you? The Nike logo has peeled off, but the lettering on the side is all good. ‘Polysorb Hyper Gel Cushion’ it reads. Not Real Leather. Polysorb.” Tony laughed, like he’d just told a funny joke. “Because I like my shoes with a bit of damping, with Iron Man being so hard on the joints. And my joints were giving me a hell of a time, even though I hadn’t flown in the suit for months.”

He leaned in conspiratorially. “You don’t tell Pepper, but I was bawling my eyes out even before I put the Hyper Gel in my mouth, knowing full well I wouldn’t get a taste of a burger patty that day. It felt really squishy between my teeth. Squishy and salty. I supposed that maybe if I thought of seafood, if I just rearranged my ideas I could still satisfy my appetite. I mean, had anyone ever tried eating Polysorb before? Maybe I could digest it. God help me, I’d been eating some highly dubious stuff before that too.

“So I suck on it a little more, get all the salt out of those pores — and don’t give me that look, Bruce, you’d have done it too — before I decide, fuck, I’ll go through with it. I move it to one side so I can get a good clamp on it with my grinders and I bite down. Something pops. I think at first it’s the gel leaking out. It has a really weird taste to it, texture too, you know, like a bad silicone tit might feel like. I give it a once over, see the indents of my teeth all right, but the Hyper Gel is already resetting its form, no hole there whatsoever. The cooky taste’s still in my mouth though, comes from my
mouth and next thing I know I’m spitting out a molar, the whole thing, all three roots.”

Tony pantomimed spitting. Little stray flecks of saliva hit the kitchen floor.

“I turned my shoes over every which way that day. One-hundred percent synthetic. Gore-tex. Cost a fortune, but I’d starve in them all the same. And I lost a tooth in the bet too. God, how that gap bothered me! Tongue was there all the time, night and day, like it was waiting for some miracle closure. I didn’t try with that one, but once it was clear my pearly whites were on a run for freedom I did attempt to put back the odd one or two. Stupid, yeah, but I couldn’t help it. I kept seeing myself all granpa gums, coming across this juicy sucker of a Triple Whopper and unable to dig in because that bitch of a scurvy snookered me so good before.

“I’ve been back three months now and I’m still dreaming of that burger. It’s a real vivid dream too. Me, sat at a table, equipped with a napkin and a glass of red. Someone brings me a plate — square shaped, not round — and in between two toasted whole wheat buns, grilled to perfection, is the tip of Polysorb Hyper Gel. With the Nike logo peeled off in places, but the side lettering all dandy. I take it in both hands — ‘cause of course I still have two of them in the dream — and I wolf it all down in one go. I usually wake up after that, but I remember it’s the best thing I ever tasted in my life.”

Tony smiled. It was a sad smile, the kind people wore when they started regretting something. “I’m not doing the sludge diet again, Bruce. Ever.”

“Ok,” Bruce said, clearing his throat to get rid of some of the hoarseness. “No sludge.”

He wanted to pat Tony on the arm, or hug him, or do something that would indicate that he’d taken all of that on board. But he didn’t think that would go down very well, so instead he just offered what he could. “Do you want me to make you burgers tomorrow?”

Tony's face brightened. He looked like a kid on Christmas morning. It was the first genuine smile that Bruce had seen in a while.

“Oh yeah,” he said. “I’d be down for a heart attack on a bun.”

They treated the burger dinner as a kind of mini-celebration. Pepper was there for it, had brought an assortment of dips and sauces that were on Tony’s wish list. Another thing on that list seemed to be the bottle of Chardonnay Tony had conjured up from the alcohol stash he wasn’t supposed to have access to, which was the current point of debate. Bruce found himself mediating two solidly opposing sides.

“Are you sure that's a good idea?” Pepper was saying, implying that it was anything but.

“I'm not saying let's do tequila slammers but I think I earned me some accolades here,” Tony countered. “I’m doing good. I’m doing real good.”

“Am I missing something?” Bruce asked and he was frustrated. He wasn't getting any down time. The shaved off night hours were taking their toll.

“The corkscrew,” said Tony unhelpfully. “You’re missing the corkscrew.”

“Well, it just occurred to me,” Pepper began, not doing a very good job of hiding that it hadn't just occurred to her at all. “That maybe after four years sober it might be a step backwards to start drinking again.”

“Don’t be a drag, Pep. It’s one glass. In Moderation. I can do that.”
Bruce stared at his plate, reluctant to get involved. Anyone on the planet with eyes and access to a smartphone knew that Tony Stark had a reputation for partying, sometimes a little bit too hard.

“I'm just saying,” Pepper insisted. “Maybe it's as good a reason as any for a fresh start?”

He wasn't sure how to process this new revelation on Tony. It spoke of deeper issues that made him wish for either one of them to be honest with him. Was Tony a recovering alcoholic? Bruce was supposed to be his doctor, on call for his every medical need. Had he just blithely given Tony the ok to relapse into problem drinking? Was this another point that was going to end up filed into the big folder marked 'Pepper-and-Tony-Issues', a mess that he was somehow supposed to navigate with absolutely zero prior intel?

Bruce thought he saw Pepper’s shoulders slump with a faint relief as she picked the bottle off the table after Tony grudgingly relented. Out of sight out of mind seemed to be the prevailing effort.

“Guess I'm as sober as a nun,” Tony said with fake enthusiasm. “Good luck to the gutter press black-painting me now.”

“I'm pretty sure nuns drink,” Bruce blurted out. “Communion wine.”

“You know the tabloids won't dare touch you,” Pepper said. “Your sacrifice-for-humanity bit has bought you at least six months of unconditional adoration before your halo loses its shine. You got the full Lady Di treatment for a while after you went through the portal.”

“I watched that featurette,” Tony said dreamily. “Real tear jerker.”

He’d sold Bruce into viewing the special with him twice. Unless Tony had ever been shy about soaking up his own publicity, that part of his character at least hadn’t changed.

“You've been out of the game a while,” Pepper continued noncommittally, ignorant of the fact that she had lost Tony to whatever phantasms were fighting for his attention. “We'll need to think about media training, get you back on top of the podium… Tony?”

She reached over to take the fork from his white knuckled grip. Bruce thought that it was better if she didn't keep doing that. Part of him wanted to observe what happened if Tony's reveries were left to reach their natural conclusions, what he'd do without Pepper there to anchor him back to the present.

“Media training,” Pepper repeated, somewhat tersely. “And you're not going near a camera until you can stop zoning out like that. We need you invincible out there, no room for the tabloid hacks to drum up speculation.”

Pepper expressed her doubts about Tony's readiness for the limelight on a regular basis. Bruce supposed she wanted him presented to the public as a finished product rather than the PTSD-ridden work in progress he currently was. He thought, in his less charitable moments, that this was because she was worried about the effects on the company, that Tony returning from the dead could be either a massive boost to stock prices or a total disaster, depending on what state the media perceived him to be in. And maybe that was part of it, but there was genuine worry overriding everything else. Pepper's considerations regarding the business never seemed to come from an entirely selfish place. She treated Stark Industries as an extension of Tony himself, a legacy that she wanted to protect and look after.

“We'll get a soft-ball interviewer for your big return,” Pepper continued. “All questions pre-approved. We could ask for the moon on a stick and they'd give us it for the chance at an exclusive.”

“It might be a little early,” Bruce noted softly. “To be thinking about interviews.”
“You don’t know the media, Bruce,” said Tony, now forkless, picking at his food with his fingers. There was a shaming undertone whenever Pepper or Bruce had to cut his food for him, so they generally stuck to meal choices that bypassed the need for two-handed table manners.

“It’s never too soon to think about interviews,” Tony said. For a moment he sounded like his old self, the slick business mogul he’d been in another life.

Pepper seemed all for it. There was a glint in her eye and a determined satisfaction in her expression, as though she’d been waiting for the thing that would turn a corner for them and this was it. “We can go over everything,” she said. “Start hashing out the details.”

Tony gave this genuine consideration. Then he said, “I’d like to take a sledgehammer to my headstone.” And just like that it was as though a switch had been flipped from old Tony to a cheap parody of the man he'd once been. Over-excited and unfocused, with a sharp edge of lunacy to it all.

“I think,” he continued, the stream of consciousness pouring from his mouth veering from the sublime to the ridiculous fairly quickly, “that we should build me a new arm too. A robotic arm. Pep could get the Mark VI gauntlet from Malibu, and we’ll figure out how to attach it to me — permanently.”

“Tony...” Bruce began, sensing that this ship was heading into difficult waters.

But Tony kept talking, vomiting out ideas in an increasingly manic fashion. Had he been like this before? There had always been a hint of mania about Tony, Bruce thought, but this erred far more on the side of the pathological.

A staged return in Times Square sounded horrendous and he sincerely hoped that the public would never be treated to a wild-eyed, one-armed Tony Stark smashing up his own grave with power tools. Bruce also couldn't think of anything more tone deaf, having seen the way that Pepper had mourned him at the funeral. He remembered her tight, drawn expression as she fought to keep it together while they buried an empty casket. She was wearing the ghost of that expression now.

Tony's ramblings had slightly shifted focus and gone up a gear in terms of biological implausibility. Bruce winced slightly at the idea and, not for the first time, thanked a God he didn't believe in that Jarvis had been there for Tony's space travels, to temper the worst of his propensity for self injury.

“You can't just stick an Iron Man gauntlet on your stump,” Bruce said. He waved slightly to get Tony to focus in his direction. “Let’s slow it down somewhat.”

“No, I’ll have an arm, you’ll see,” Tony said in an almost prophetic announcement. “All will be good again.” He stood up abruptly, upending his chair and scampering off in his stiff, half-limping gait towards the basement stairs.

Bruce stared awkwardly at the general mess Tony had left in his wake before glancing at Pepper and seeing more of the same.

“You know,” he began. “It's still early days and—”

He didn't have the chance to finish the sentence before she burst into tears, her shoulders shaking with silent sobs. Even without a pre-existing close relationship it was hard not to feel distressed at seeing a formerly brilliant man firing off erratically in all directions, there one minute and somewhere unreachable the next.

Pepper dabbed at her eyes with her sleeve. “I should go after him. Check he's ok.”
Bruce put a restraining hand on her shoulder. “Sit. Don't. He'll throw some schematics on a scrap paper and look at it in six months' time, realizing it’s ridiculous. Let him get it out of his system.”

Pepper looked like she was about to break out in tears again.

“You don't have to be there for him all the time,” Bruce said. “He's going to have moments like that for a little while longer. He's getting there, but these things take time. As long as he's just scribbling and not actively sticking wires in himself it's fine to let him work through some of it on his own.”

He thought of Tony on the kitchen floor, illuminated by the fridge light. 

Six-hundred, five-fifty, four — Bruce, it’s not enough, not even if I only eat every other day. What am I going to do?

“I know I should be patient,” Pepper said. ”But it’s hard... so hard. And it scares me, Bruce, that look he gets sometimes? When he shuts off? I never know if he’ll come back from it.” She faltered, putting her head in her hands as the confession leaked out of her. “I just wish he was his old self, my Tony, not this... this thing that came back, looking like him and talking in his voice but not being my Tony in a million years.”

She took the handkerchief he offered and looked at him pleadingly, willing him to negate all of her arguments, to reassure her that when Tony walked off this island he’d do it in a suit and not in a straight jacket.

Bruce tried to be tactful about it. “Nobody's disputing what Tony went through. But just because he suffered a major trauma doesn't mean that nobody else matters. You've been through a lot too.”

Pepper could do with detaching herself a little. He understood the urge to go full mother-hen around Tony, but it tended to do more harm than good for all parties involved. And if Tony had thrown hurtful rants at Bruce on more than one occasion that was one thing, but if he was letting his frustrations loose with Pepper too, who was far more emotionally entangled in his recovery, then it was only going to make things more fraught.

He thought that this was probably his cue to tell her that things were going to get better, that Tony was making great progress, that this new drug regimen would be the one that might help break through the fog. But instead he just mustered up as best a smile as he could and told her the truth.

“Pepper, I think you need a break.”

Chapter End Notes

Everyone is hitting compassion fatigue, Tony is the patient from hell and things are only going to get worse before they get better.

In the meantime, bon appetit, gentle reader.
Chapter 32

Chapter Notes

Hi. No, it's not Tuesday, but yes, this is a legitimate update. Due to scheduling conflicts we will be updating twice a week for the remaining five chapters rather than put you on a month long hiatus in August.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was ever only going to be a matter of time before SHIELD came whistling for Tony’s submission, and Pepper wasn’t in the least surprised when Hill eventually called to announce the visit. They needed to run Tony through another debrief, she said. And it wasn't as though Pepper could refuse, because that would mean admitting that Bruce was glossing over the truth in regards to Tony's progress from a mental health point of view. Tony, who was currently pacing the room like a restless prisoner charting the dimensions of his cell. The closer the clock ticked to the arrival of the SHIELD representative, the worse he seemed to get.

“This is private property,” Pepper assured him. “We're doing SHIELD a courtesy by meeting them. You can blow this off at any time.”

It wasn't true, but it didn’t do to deprive Tony of his illusion of choice. Bruce had let slip that there had been interrogation sessions back at the base, and the way he’d phrased it implied that they weren’t looking at an afternoon tea party today.

Bruce entered through the front door trailed by a small slight man Pepper didn’t recognize. Mid-to-late twenties, slicked back hair, some graduate-entry whizkid SHIELD had picked up and molded into whatever they needed him to be -- apparently today the theme was white collar government issue pedantry. The kid carried his briefcase with the air of someone who clearly thought he was more important than he actually was.

Tony had taken up position in the armchair. Maybe he smelled blood in the water, or an easy win. He didn’t get up for politesse anyway, going for the intimidation play. Good. The kid sat down, waving off Pepper’s attempts to pour him a glass of lemonade.

“I prefer to cut right to it,” he said. His voice was faintly nasal. “We're in the process of recovering the Chitauri ship from orbit, and there seem to be some anomalous discoveries. We’re unable to decipher all of your... terming, Mr Stark. It would help our technicians if you could give us further insight into whatever system you used to catalogue everything on board.”

Tony feigned a nonchalant shrug. “I wasn’t aware that SHIELD did valet service now,” he said. “Park the ship at Stark R&D Long Beach. My boys will take it from there.”

Hit with a barrage of sarcasm the agent kept an impressively neutral expression. Clearly he'd been briefed on what to expect from Tony Stark.

Pepper cleared her throat. “The bottom line here is that there is still a discussion to be had over who holds proprietary ownership over the ship. This is a case without precedent. While we are allowing you to access the craft — as a goodwill gesture — it doesn't mean that its contents can be interfered with, or altered as you see fit.”
The kid, who had as of yet to give a name, opened his briefcase to sprout a thick stack of paperwork. Fury didn’t send his people unprepared.

“This interim emergency order issued in the interests of national security gives us full access to the vessel and its contents for the period stated here.” He tapped at a paragraph on the second page. “I’d invite you to have your lawyers look over it, Ms Potts, but given that one of the conditions of Mr Stark’s release into your custody was a binding secrecy clause, there is nobody you can show it to. You’ll have to take my word for it that everything is above board.”


Ever the peacemaker, Bruce decided to step in before Tony’s borderline composure got them all into trouble in the first five minutes. “Is there something specific that you’re having trouble analyzing? It’s an extremely large ship.”

“Certainly.”

The kid lined up an assortment of 8x11s. There were close-up images of scrawled schematics, others of daubed obscenities. Many looked like they came straight from a child’s nightmare. It was the first time she saw the reality of what Tony’s martyrdom had entailed. In her mind’s eye it all had a sanitized sheen to it, but this — bloodied corridors, gouged out walls — this was grim and dirty and prison-like.

“We can't begin clean up until we know which markings are significant, and which are...” He gestured to where part of the lyrics to Black Sabbath’s Paranoid were scrawled in an unidentifiable brown smear. “...less so.”

Tony leafed through the photographs, turning paler by the moment despite his efforts at keeping a devil-may-care expression on his face. He quickly covered the shots depicting soiled medical equipment.

Almost simultaneously Bruce croaked, “Excuse me. I need some air.” He all but fled the room, making a beeline for the front door.

So much for backup, Pepper thought. She refocused on Tony. It hadn’t taken long at all to derail him. The last hint of poise was gone. He was as tense as a bowstring as he finally peeled his eyes from the evidence.

“Ten minutes, make it quick,” Tony said. He looked up at Pepper, the little tan he’d acquired morphed into an unhealthy grey. “Would you check on Bruce?”

Pepper frowned at the idea of leaving him alone with this snake in a suit, although she wasn't sure who she was more concerned for. From the looks of things Tony was struggling to keep a grip on himself. She squeezed his shoulder in support. “I’ll be back right away.”

Bruce was easily located. He sat on a rock on the beachfront, staring out at the horizon. It was the wrong time for guilt addled self-reflection, Pepper thought, not hugely in the mood for handing out pep talks while Tony was unchecked in the living room. Bruce’s personal traumas associated with the ship were one thing, but Tony’s were a completely different ball game. Right now, keeping Tony together had to be the focus.

“Is he all right?” Bruce asked. “Seeing those?”

“Probably not,” Pepper said. Which was exactly why she didn’t want to waste time pampering Bruce’s bruised ego.
“Is this my cue to get my ass back inside? Help you deal with Agent Brylcreem?”

“Tony’s already losing his cool. I don’t want things to get out of hand.”

“I’ll cry myself to sleep later,” Bruce said wryly, and they went back inside to where Tony was reeling off information in a dull, tight voice, his one fist clenched.

“The ‘processor’ is a bio-kinetic router. I logged users, very primit—”

“And this here? It looks like a voltage conversion chart, but the intervals are off. Can you annotate it?”

“That’s a three, not a—”

The table was full of pictures now, edge to edge. Some of them were colored instead of the usual black and white. Predominantly red. Pepper inched closer, but had to look away almost instantly. Those were pictures of Jim. Pictures of what was left of Jim.

She wanted to demand what the point was to lay them out like that, other than winding Tony up, but she suspected she already knew the answer. The kid was vindictive in his interrogation style. This was no accident. And it worked. Tony was wearing down fast. She put a hand on his back, where sweat stains began to soak through the dress shirt.

The purpose of this little visit wasn’t just about getting the answer key to Tony’s homework. They were feeling out how compliant he was likely to be, how much of a fight he’d put up over that damned ship, laying the foundations, perhaps, for declaring him mentally unsound.

“Long term stasis cycling,” continued the agent. “NASA has yet to achieve a working test run of this. I understand this is an imposition on your time, but we’ve already attempted to interrogate the on-board AI, with unhelpful results, so if you could—”

Call it the straw that broke the camel’s back.

“You molested Jarvis?”

“That’s a counterfactual accusation. Also, page five,” rebuked the agent, tapping dismissively at his interim order. “We have full authorization to put together a complete picture of events which took place on board the craft. That includes events which occurred prior to our team setting foot on the vessel.”

By now Tony was all but foaming at the mouth. The only reason he didn’t bolt for the kid’s throat was Pepper forcefully pushing him down into his seat.

“I don’t care what’s on your fucking order!” Tony spat. He was livid underneath a quickly cracking veneer of etiquette. “You’re leaving. Right now.”

“Yes, Captain Rogers did mention the mood swings,” the agent remarked. He looked at Bruce disapprovingly. “You didn’t, though. We agreed that you would provide a truthful account of his medical condition, didn’t we?”

Bruce stared back for a fraction too long.

“No, I think we’re done here,” Pepper interjected, putting on her best businesslike demeanor. “You can leave the rest of the photos with us and we’ll get back to you on anything that’s relevant. Which we will do within the limits of what we are able to, without contravening our own clear intellectual
property rights and business interests. And I'm sorry to be the one to inform you, but even shady US
government sponsored paramilitary initiatives have to abide by copyright law.”

She thought that she'd beaten him into submission with that. He got up to leave, gathering his orders.
But then followed a gesture too deliberate to be just genuine afterthought.

“There is one more thing before I go.”

“Lemonade?” Tony’s voice was dripping with acrimony.

Pepper could usually trust her intuition, and it was screaming danger even before the kid opened his
mouth.

“It would be more of a favor,” he said. “But it would save the lab guys time if you could clear
something up, really just check a box for us.”

He tossed a photograph onto the coffee table. It was a close-up of a partially decomposed severed
hand.

“This is yours, right?”

She made to cover it up, but it was far too late for that. Tony stared at the kid like he’d been the one
who’d taken the knife to his arm. That was roughly when things went from civilized to shit show.
Tony jumped to his feet, ready to deliver the killing blow. Pepper was barely able to hold him back
from getting himself a life penalty. Bruce quickly ushered out the agent, who looked far too pleased
with himself than was professional.

“Jesus. Fucking. Christ!” wheezed Tony, untangled himself from her grip, and dashed out of the
room.

Pepper stared for a moment at the knocked over lemonade dripping all over the coffee table and the
floor. She picked up the soaked photo of Tony’s arm and crumpled it up in her fist. Tony had
stormed off towards the back of the house, but she hesitated to follow. What would she say to him?
She had no idea how to calm him after the legitimate catastrophe that had just gone down, and she
doubted that he’d cool off with a glass of lemonade.

She went regardless. He was out on the back porch in the lounger, rapidly tapping his foot while
looking out on a setting that would have otherwise been serene. She approached him cautiously,
putting a hand on his upper arm.

“That asshole's gone.”

“Good,” he said. He was all but fuming from the nostrils. “Good. That jack.”

“Do you need me to get Bruce to give you something?”

Tony tapped harder. “I need a break. That’s all I fucking need. A fucking break.”

“I’m going to get Bruce,” she said. Tony was sweating bullets and it scared her.

“Yeah, go fawn on Bruce,” Tony snarled. “That’s a great idea. Poor poor Bruce... in cahoots with
Fury is what he is. Like I’m stupid or what. I have eyes for God’s sake.” He looked at her, a
deranged expression on his face. “I see through you too, you know. Straight through you. Don’t
think you can play me like an idiot, cause I’m not.”
She backed off, not knowing what to say. She doubted that anything she came up with would pacify him at this point. And she didn’t like the pitch that had snaked into his voice, the way he seemed about to snap like a mad dog. She made to cut out, but as she did he shot out of his seat and caught her by the wrist.

“Hey! Hey, are you turning a deaf ear on me?” he asked shrilly. “I’ve about had it with your bitch button! I’ve about had it with all of you!”

His grip was tight, tight enough to bruise. It was frightening how strong he could be when he wanted, even in his weakened condition.

“Tony, you’re hurting me,” she said and tried to keep the alarm out of her voice. She felt like she should be yelling at him to get his fucking hand off her, because nobody had the right to touch her like that, not ever, especially not this new, rage-filled Tony. Part of her kept wishing he’d stop and break down and apologize for whatever the Hell had come over him. But he didn't. He kept going.

“What tingle? Funny, huh? Numb fingers — grub fingers. All because you blew a hole in the fucking mainframe, you dead bratva cunt—”

“Tony, let go,” she repeated. “Let go right now.”

He jerked her closer instead.

“I stanched here, all right?” he said and drew a line just below her elbow. The puckered scar tissue of his stump slid over her rosy skin.

“— and here’s where Jarvis gouged the ideal incision line to be.”

A second mark, two inches below. He made a sawing motion. “Can you wiggle your fingers for me? It’s not quite working, is it? But there’s still sensation in those tips.”

He increased the pressure. There was a creeping madness, a bitter-tinged hysteria which made him look like a completely different person. It was Tony's face and Tony's voice and Tony's hand which was clamped around her arm hard enough to make her whimper, but this wasn’t, couldn't possibly be Tony.

“See, that’s what I told Jarvis too. I said, ‘J, you’re not doing this right, you have to clinch down harder, buddy. My fingers are blue, but I can still feel them.’ And you know what he answered, babe? ‘This is the maximum load, sir. More strain will lead to a fracture, sir.’ As if breaking it in another spot could make things any worse! We were over that! So far past that!”

What he was describing in sick, graphic detail was a series of horrors that she couldn't so much as wrap her brain around. This wasn't what she'd wanted, not at all. She'd imagined that one day the wall would break down and he'd lie with his head in her lap and spill his heart out about how alone he'd been, how frightened. She wasn't prepared for there to be so much anger, a bitterness that had been bubbling hidden under the surface and was now erupting in her face.

Nowhere in all of her worst case imaginings did she think that Tony would ever look at her like he hated her. Like he could do worse things than hate her. The sort of things he'd done to Steve Rogers.

“DO IT, Pep!” Tony hollered. “There’s the switch, honey, turn it on! Don’t be a puss! Can you feel it pulse? Two hundred kilohertz are humming for your attention, babe—”

It struck her that Bruce was in the house. If she yelled loud enough he’d come running. He’d pull Tony off of her. He’d do something to end this. But yelling out for Bruce might just make Tony
angrier. Anything she did now could add fuel to his bonfire. Tony forced her arm down.

His voice had morphed, a mock intonation of Jarvis now. “And don’t forget to keep a steady hand, sir! Don’t you veer off the incision line, sir!” How are your fingers, honey? Still prickling? Hold on to that — it’s going to be the last time you ever feel them!”

She tried to pull away, but he had her in a deadlock.

“Yes, that’s right,” he spat. “Are you scared shitless yet? ‘Cause this is where I pissed myself with pain, Pepper, leaking all over my pants like a little panicked brat. And here’s where I fainted, hon! Where I woke up to a puddle of blood because J couldn’t get a good lock on my ulnar. I was spritzing all over the place like some stupid shaken soda can.”

She realized with an icy cold feeling that four years was a very long time. Long enough, maybe, for someone to have become a different person. Long enough, maybe, to strip someone of being a person at all.

Suddenly Tony recoiled. He let go.

Bruce was standing in the doorway, looking at Tony with a tense caution, the way you might look at the loud crazy homeless guy on the late night subway, who may or may not have a knife. Pepper pulled down her sleeve.

“Everything ok?”

Tony looked from Bruce to Pepper and back, nostrils flaring. “Yeah, we’re good here,” he said in a little mellower tone. He pulled Pepper in by the waist, but it was a rough, boorish move. “We’re living the dream. Happily ever after. Aren’t we, Pep?”

She couldn’t bring herself to reply. He pushed her away then, disgusted with her or maybe with himself. But he didn’t come to his senses. He said instead, “I’ll check out the beachfront. Don’t bother waiting up.”

He stormed off. They let him go.

“Did he hurt you?”

Bruce kept his distance and miraculously, a straight face. It gave her the idea that this wasn’t the first time he’d seen domestic abuse. She felt the onrush of shame creep up her cheeks regardless. There was one promise to herself she’d sworn to stay true to, and that was never letting someone treat her the way Tony just had.

Pepper looked down at her wrist. Angry welts looked back at her. She didn’t think it was broken, but it was already beginning to swell. She’d asked Bruce what felt like a lifetime ago to go and find Tony for her. It had taken four years to pay up that promise, but he’d done it, he’d brought him home. She was tempted to make a similar demand now, to fix him. Because Tony had come back, but he’d come back wrong. Very, very wrong.

Bruce sighed. “I wasn’t eavesdropping, but I caught the tail end. This has happened before. On the ship.”

“And you were going to mention this when?” she snapped, because if she was angry then she wasn’t scared, and that was better.

Bruce didn’t flinch. “I did,” he said, and she realized he was right, he had. “I thought we had him on
the right regimen this time. But knowing and experiencing are two different things. I’m sorry.”

“He needs help,” she said. “That guy was pushing his buttons deliberately.”

“He needs specialist help. The kind that you and I can't provide. Fury never wanted him released in the first place, you know. This might be them trying to engineer a situation where we're forced to ask for their help because he's unstable. Then they can call the whole thing a failure, hold up their hands and say 'well, it didn’t work out, too bad.’”

“We can't let that happen,” she said firmly. “That would be the end of him.”

She wondered what would be the end of her. Tony was continuously pushing her towards a cliff side, consciously or not. He’d just given her an unbalancing push. She wondered how many more of those she’d have to take in the future.

Bruce led her back inside. Pepper closed the balcony door. She told herself it was so that the A/C didn’t run for nothing, but in reality she didn’t want to be caught off guard when Tony eventually returned. This new, unpredictable Tony.

Without saying anything, Bruce went to the front door and locked it. She was glad he’d taken that decision out of her hands.

After that things were awkward at first, with them sitting around in silence sipping tea. Bruce made an attempt at small talk, which she seized on a bit too enthusiastically. It wasn't long before they were talking about anything and everything that wasn't this afternoon's events.

He told her rambling stories about his travels, about Indian summers and funny patients he'd encountered and other, less happy things. About being on the run, and about poverty, and the way people lived in the developing world.

For her part, she talked just as much. About running the company, about various altercations with board members and how hard she'd had to fight after being appointed CEO. About Happy Hogan, who attracted so many ridiculous complaints that it would make more business sense to fire him, but she couldn't ever let him go because his heart was in the right place.

After sunset Pepper locked down the windows. She briefly considered going out looking for Tony. She could see him, drowning in the sea, finding something to hurt himself with or rolling in a patch of sand in a panic attack with no one there to help him through it. But then she looked down at her purpling wrist, and decided that Tony Stark was a grown man and this wasn't the first time that he’d stayed out past his bedtime.

He had made his way back from outer space. He could make his way back to the house on his own just fine.

Chapter End Notes

Lemonade, anyone?
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

This is a Tony chapter, so feel triggered.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

He thinks it’d hurt worse by now. He raises the arm, stares at hot-rod red finger plating.

His own voice comes from far away. “Eject.”

The gauntlet unhooks. Some of the pressure abates, but it isn’t a good feeling. He tries to flex, to extend, to regain some sort of control. No response, just distant pins and needles. He jabs a finger at the flesh of his forearm. Jesus, is it ugly, swelled up like a tire.

“How are we on the tourniquet?”

The plasma cutter waits patiently on the sideline. Shit. How to do this? Does he stand? Does he sit? Does he prop it against something? And why is he still so rational about it?

“You want me to do it fucking smash me, pal. I won’t touch that thing as long as I can still spell my name. Shoot me to the moon.”

A prick in his thigh, the suit’s dispenser. At least Jarvis is sensible.

“Keep it coming,” he says. “Steady flow. Hit it hard right before.”

Deep breath.

Better do it sitting down.

He reaches for the cutter, shaking from anxiety and the oncoming high. The suit moves fluidly, a secure grip around the sci-fi butcher’s knife. No doubt Jarvis stabilizes.

Fuck.

He gets to his feet. He can’t sit.

Count back from ten.

Nineeightseven — he can.

He can bring it off.

He really—

Can’t.

A frustrated gurgle in the back of his throat. Tunnel vision sets in. He sways a little when he tries to turn. Pinwheeling, he juts out both arms to steady against the buzz.
Wrist slips, bone against bone, J has to whack that plunger hard.

“Fuck! Jesus fuck—” The plasma cutter goes hurling and Tony launches into a fit, raging, high, somewhere close to moon’s orbit. “Seriously, fuck this place! Fuck the monsters and fuck the aliens and fuckthisclusterfuckofanid—”

He's rolling. The dope's kicking in.

“Sir—”

“No!” he barks. “I'm talking now! Listen. Not gonna go through with this. There’s another way. Find it!”

There are calculations. He knows he isn’t leading with promising percentage, but right now? It's not giving up, he tells J. Pinky swear. Not for nothing. Not all of it for nothing. But he can’t do this.

“Sir.”

It thumps all the way to his ears now, white hot pain. His wrist bends like it was made of rubber, flopping up and down like a dead slimy slug.

The suit locks. Joints straighten.

Another prick and he feels wonky, detached. Utterly terrified.

He watches himself bend down to pick up the cutter, when all he wants is to kick it as far as it goes.

“You sonofa—”

No control!

“It’s in your best interest, sir.”

“Don’t you—” He's floating. “Jarvis, no—” Slurring. “—STOP!”

His knees buckle. Iron Man stands straight. His index finger pushes down on the switch. The HUD superimposes the optimum incision line.

*jesus mary mother of god pray for us sinners amen amen amen—*

He squeals, mouse in a trap, can’t look, has to, J in his ear, “I’m with you, sir, hold tight.”

A last pinprick, a wet slosh, limb hitting ground.

The shock-trauma rams into him with the force of a freight train.

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Two days before SHIELD showed up, Pepper had come home while him and Bruce had been mid-dinner (floating some legit brainstorm on the robotic arm) and narrated a week long business trip into a curt ‘It was a waste of time.’

She downed half a bottle of wine that Tony wasn’t allowed to touch, sprouting the first bout of envy at the way the tension left her shoulders as the alcohol turned her cheeks flushed. Tony remembered that feeling and hell did he miss it. The pills could calm him down, knock him out if he needed them to, but it wasn’t the same pathos of a chilled Chenin Blanc slipping down his throat, one leisurely glass after another until the world turned a rosier place.
After dinner Bruce scammed. He wasn’t made up of the stuff for threesomes and Tony didn’t particularly feel like sharing. Him and Pepper went to the couch. She kicked off her shoes and put her feet in his lap like she used to before the portal. She started talking, unloading. He kept nodding and gave her a one-handed foot rub.

One thing led to another. Pepper’s inhibition threshold dropped while Tony’s hand climbed from her ankles up her thigh and under her skirt. There was hazy talk of a night they’d shared in Venice involving strawberry sorbet and a blue garter set. (He remembered her hair across the pillow that she moaned into while he fucked her from behind, with her still wearing heels at his insistence.)

Only this time he didn’t have two hands to hold her hips with so she had to straddle him. His t-shirt stayed on while her blouse had to go, with him clumsily cupping at a handful of tits and lace. It didn’t take long to realize he wasn’t getting it up though, not even a twitch. Pepper was tactful at first, reaching into his boxers, frenching him, pretending to still be turned on despite his limp excuse of a dick.

Oh, she might have given him all the usual platitudes; it happened to everyone, it wasn’t a big deal, it might just be a side effect of the truckload of meds Bruce had him swallow day in, day out. Things would sort themselves out.

Sure they would. Randy dandy midnight candy.

It was easy to be patient, or to make believe, when Pepper was off getting railed on her ‘business trips’ while her crippled, impotent boyfriend sat neatly tucked out of the way. Slam on that Hollywood pose, all teeth tits and toes, and they lined up like lobotomized sheep. He knew the rules of the game — he’d played in the pro division during his time.

No, Tony would just have to make Bruce slip him some blue steel. And then he'd show Pepper. He'd fuck her the way he used to, the way she craved it, the kind where he'd bend her over and take her and she'd beg him to go harder, oh please Tony, please.

The sun filtered through the canopy as he let himself fully wake up to the memory of that plea. Something danced at the periphery of his mind, another entreaty, one that didn’t fit with his fantasy of hotel rooms and garter sets and Pepper on her knees looking up at him with his cock in her mouth.

She liked it rough sometimes. But not like that. Not the kind of rough that left her with a bracelet of bruises and him locked out of the house.

He’d decided to sleep in the deckchair in the end, rather than going through with his first flight of fancy which had been to knock the door off its hinges and rewrite the rule book (naughty girls were frowned upon in the Stark household).

It was a bitter pill to swallow, knowing that Pepper felt safer being locked up with a guy who could turn into a monster at the very next sneeze rather than being around Tony. He did not like the color that painted him in. Not at all.

Unwrapping his arms from where they were laced across his chest against the chill of the nightly ocean breeze he stretched against the stiffness. He had a crook in his neck. He felt hungover, like after a bad trip to Vegas. It took a moment’s processing until he managed to blink the shadow standing over him into focus.

Not Pepper.

Tony squinted against the rising sun, then squinted at the thing in Bruce’s hand.
“The hot dose? Really?”

The doc palmed a syringe. He didn't even have the good grace to look apologetic, which was a red flag because half the time Bruce looked like he was sorry for breathing.

“How are you feeling?” Bruce's go-to line when he couldn't think of anything better to say.

“Fine,” Tony said. “Peachy.”

“Do you remember what happened?” Bruce asked in the annoyingly careful tone of someone talking a mental patient down from the roof of the psych ward.

He had something glib on the tip of his tongue, but it died when he spotted Pepper in the doorway. She was wearing a tank top and shorts, and she didn't bother to hide the circlet of livid bruises around her wrist. She looked wary. He'd never seen her look at him like that, not even that time that she'd walked up on him getting all handy with Jack because he’d been too amped on speed to code and had a project burning a hole in his brain. She'd calmly told him then that it was time for bed, and Jarvis had agreed, and he'd crashed on the walk-in shower floor because he’d thought it was his bed.

Jarvis would know what to do now.

The thought hit him with a sudden, immediate clarity. He couldn't be expected to function, to recover, to be himself. Not when J was gone. Tony would have likened his absence to a missing limb, but he knew already what that felt like, and it was a shit analogy.

“Look, Tony.” Bruce started. There was a lecture coming that Tony didn't want to hear, not now when he'd figured it all out.

“J.” Tony cut him off. “I need Jarvis.”

“No. That’s not what we need to talk about right now. Listen...” But Tony didn't need to listen. Bruce wasn't J. Accept no substitutes, dad used to say.

“Tony, you hit your girlfriend.”

The words were like the crack of a whip in the air. Bruce's eyes were flashing, but just in a regular-person-angry way, not in a run-for-your-fucking-life kind of way.

It felt almost like that once, the first time Tony had really fucked up. Seventeen and a half, piss-drunk, still licking the powder off from under his snotty nose. Oh, it hadn’t been his first stint with snow white, but he’d never presented himself like that before, unbuttoned slacks, booger sugar, and his mates Jack n’ Daniels on the porch of Howard Stark’s residence in uppity Manhattan.

They hadn’t even opened the door at first, despite Tony clocking the ding-dong ditch for ten minutes straight. Probably thought he was one of those urban outdoorsmen — ‘domestically challenged’ as dad liked to put it — with his coattails hanging out like a windsock and his tie in his hand instead of around his throat.

Eventually they had opened the door and he’d been sure his old man had wanted say something whippety that’d translate to the likes of ‘get lost, squidward’, but all of that was before Howard had realized he wasn’t dealing with a street oyster but with his very own son.

Tony suspected he’d still wanted to say ‘get lost’, but instead he’d taken Tony by the arm and hauled him inside, shutting the door before this lunchbag letdown could make it into tomorrow’s Times headlines.
“Clean yourself up, son,” he’d said. “You look like you dunked your face in a bowl of chalk.”

And Tony had grinned, snorting up the boogers, because that was exactly what he’d done. That, and a little extra.

He didn’t snort up no boogers now, though. His nose was dry as the hills of Gilboa and he’d dropped that unseemly habit even before he’d dropped the cocaine. Not that he thought Columbian marching powder was going to help him through this particular fuck up. It hadn’t back then, not really, and oh boy, had it made things awkward after he’d washed his face like Howard had made him, only to open the bathroom door and face up mom and dad for that kind of talk.

“Are we having that kind of talk now?” he checked with Pepper, who looked like about the only kind of talk she was willing to have was one where Tony didn’t come out on top as the glorified hero.

Pepper didn’t reply. He could see it steaming behind her put-on though, little puffs coming out her nostrils like Indian smoke signals.

“I’m gonna go wash my face first,” he said, because if they were doing it this way, they were doing it right.

He maneuvered past Bruce, dragging his right foot a little. Turned out that deckchair yoga wasn’t helpful to pelvic rehab, and neither had been his impromptu cartographic expedition across the island the night before. It’d need days to get that stiffness out of his joints. He’d limp along like some sodden rat, cane or no cane. At this point a bamboo stick wasn’t going to make no difference, not if everything simmered down to that kind of talk.

He stayed in the bathroom a good long time — not the en suite, it was pretty clear whose toothbrush had been rehoused from that one — but the one across from the kitchen, with the in-built shower seat and the extra handle on the right wall that Tony still sometimes used to pull himself up from the thunderbox (only on bad days though).

He splashed cold water over his face, slurped some up and gurgled it in the back of his throat. He made sure to brush through his mustache, although there was nothing more incriminating in it today than stray sand corns from his foray on the beach.

Back at Manhattan Mansion mom and dad had waited sat at the dinner table with Howard at its head and Maria as his right-hand henchman. Tony had plopped into a far off chair, still feeling on top of the world. Kudos to dad for taking a piss on that, too.

“What’s that?” he’d asked, trying to stay ambiguous. Mom had been holding on to an envelope. Surely not another praise jaunt. They wouldn’t sit him down in the middle of half past morning to read him some shoestring accolades. Not when he’d been that close to a sweet-mother-of-cheesus crash.

“You’re going into a detoxification center,” Howard had said. “To dry out.”

“We’re worried about you,” supplemented his mother, as though that’d make the news any more palatable.

Three decades later Tony revisited this exact deja-vu setting, only it wasn’t his parents looking like he was the biggest disappointment since the crucifixion, but Pepper and Bruce waiting behind the kitchen counter.

Tony’s eyes darted across it. He wondered if they’d hidden an inconspicuous white envelope under
the fruit basket. Only this ticket wouldn’t be for The Dunes, East Hampton, it’d be for a lifetime residential program on board of the Betty Ford Clinic, Chitauri corpse-ship. You’re going back, Tony. For how long, you ask? Well, for-fucking-ever, lad. To die out.

“I need Jarvis,” he said. There wasn’t anything else to say. It all hinged on J now.

“What you need,” Bruce began. “Is to swallow these.”

Tony peered into the paper cup. More pink ones than usual. If he took them all he wouldn’t talk, he’d drool through his arguments.

But Pepper’s stare bore into him like Howard’s used to, so Tony obediently downed the pills. Sometimes it wasn’t worth fighting back. He’d had that drilled into him on too many occasions.

“I’ll need the basement PC,” he said, having sketched a mental list of required parts. “We’ll have to ship in some stuff from Malibu too.”

“Tony,” Pepper interjected sternly. Ok, so they wouldn’t ship in anything from Malibu then. “You don’t need a tech project. You need professional therapy.”

He stared at the wrist stripes of mottled red and purple, but what he was really thinking of was that a part of J was still up there on that ship, and those sons of bitches were weeding through his coding like a wheat wacker through a dandelion stem. Plucking him apart like they’d ripped through Tony with their stupid, petty questions. How is this relevant? Page five. Check on page five why we can stick it up your ass, you faggot. It’s all on page five. Take it with some lube.

Something turned in his stomach, like he’d just eaten escargots or mussels. Tony had a love-hate relationship with escargots and mussels, just like he had a love-hate relationship with the brass tacks of reality.

Pepper stood there like she was expecting him to act on the spot, to go and stick J into the USB port so they could watch together how his lucidity downloaded onto a Windows computer. Maybe they would hold hands. And then he’d bend her over the keyboard and take her for a real rough ride, just so she knew how not-easy all of this was for him. Or maybe not, he thought. He needed that keyboard to recode Jarvis.

“I’ll make do with what’s available in the house,” he offered by way of a peace treaty.

Pepper looked equal parts concerned and enraged. “Did you listen to anything I just said?”

He hadn’t even realized she’d been talking.

“So no,” deducted Pepper. Someone would have to work on their poker face. Someone whose name started with a T. Oops.

“Actually, it might not be a bad idea,” said Bruce in an unexpected surge of alliance.

“Of course it’s not a bad idea,” Tony replied. “I don’t have bad ideas. Ba-ad. Bad ideas.” Oh, those goddamn little pink tongue-twisters.

Pepper wasn’t sold though. She could see straight through him, like only his mother had been able to before biting into the dashboard of Howard’s Daimler.

“No. Pep. Listen. Just liiiii-sten. He’s the key. J. I’m sorry about your arm, but he’s it. I know it.”
“You’re sorry. Really? That’s all? It gets swiped under the carpet because you happened to have an epiphany?”

He didn’t like the way she twisted the words in his mouth.

“I’m going to take a time-out,” she announced. “A longer trip away. Until you get back on track.”

“Dis is about three nights ago, isn’t id?” It couldn’t be about anything else. She needed her fix, that was it.

“What?” Pepper looked mortified, reddening like a ripe tomato. Bruce looked somewhat thrown for a loop, but Tony would clear it all up for him. This was about performance, and Tony’s lack thereof. He opened his mouth, but Pepper cut him off. “It’s not about three nights ago, Tony. It’s about yesterday. About this.”

She waved her wrist in his face. He made a faintly annoyed swipe with his own. He wasn’t blind. He knew fine well what bruised wrists looked like, thanks a lot.

“I think,” Bruce intervened. “That setting up Jarvis, offline only of course, might not be the wrong way to go.”

Good man. Bruce was always going to be easier to persuade than Pepper. He didn’t look thrilled at the news of Pepper's sabbatical, though. Either he wasn't looking forward to the 24/7 Tony Stark Show or he was going to miss having something to ogle.

The pills were kicking in now, bulldozing over his focus. Tony’s face felt slacker, the tension leaving him. He made a sound that was halfway between a snort and a giggle.

“I ged it, Pep. Girls just wanna have fu-un. Take ‘at holiday, fin someone to slu-uuu-rp off, seeifIcare.”

Pepper looked furious. Bruce looked chastened. They exchanged glances, aka, the grown ups were talking now. Tony stuck his tongue out at the ceiling, the fuzziness from the meds wrapping around him like a blanket. Their voices sounded far away, like the sea outside.

“...professional help. I’m not a psychotherapist and we can’t risk SHIELD playing around with his head, not after...”

“...just feels like a band-aid. We don’t even know that the chip will work... he said himself...”

“M’ gonna go to bed,” Tony announced, because he had an idea that it was better if he could walk there instead of being dragged. He got to his feet unsteadily and looked at Bruce. There were two of him, Bruces. Plural. “Wake me up for lunch,” he told them.

Pepper — all the Peppers — looked like they were trying not to cry. Tony did not like seeing that. Pepper had no right to cry, just as his mother had no right to be dead. And yet both were, without any comprehensible justification.

Tony grabbed clumsily for her hand, but she pulled it away too quick. “Dun cry,” he begged her, promising to go after the bastard who’d made her. Nobody laid a hand on Pepper, Pepper who was his girl, Pepper who was everything he had left, Pepper whom he dearly loved.

“Jus stop cryin…” he said. “‘s all gonna be ooo-kay.”

Because J would figure it out.
J always did.

Chapter End Notes

There are ghosts everywhere if you look for them.
Between his own childhood and his time in India navigating some decidedly tricky cultural waters Bruce had seen enough domestic violence to last him a lifetime. It was the one thing he couldn't tolerate, the one thing that he reacted to with visceral disgust. So he surprised himself by managing to make excuses for Tony Stark. How he was traumatized, how he'd been having a dissociative episode, how he was horrified at the reality of what he'd done and he needed help.

Pepper was determined to keep the train on tracks, even if she couldn’t look Tony in the eye herself. They were made of better stuff than that, she told Bruce, and they couldn’t just give up on him. Bruce had once thought that if he brought Tony home he could close the cover on that chapter of his life. But it became clearer every day that this was a tome rather than a tale and that he was destined to sit it out to the last page.

Pepper had thrown herself into company business. She didn’t feel comfortable staying, even though Tony had cleared out from the master suite and moved back into his erstwhile sick room. Her and Tony were locked in a Mexican standoff that Bruce had no hope of breaking.

For his part, Tony dove into his self-imposed task of restoring Jarvis with an almost frenzied zeal. He threw everything he had into the belief that Jarvis was the master fix to all his problems. This seemed to be a recurring theme with Tony, where he found and latched on to a promise of salvation, chasing it with perverse fervor until the next best thing came around the corner and hooked him like a fish on the line.

Despite Pepper extracting a solemn promise from Bruce that he wouldn’t allow Tony on the internet, he had little to no faith of stopping him if he was hell-bent to do so. Currently Tony had taken over the basement, commandeering every electronic item he could get his hand on. Bruce refused to turn in some essential kitchen appliances, but everything else that had an on/off switch begrudgingly relocated downstairs.

Bruce himself was banished from the basement unless summoned for scut work. There were plenty of tasks impossible to do one-handed, ending in Bruce unquestioningly fetching, carrying and soldering various appliances at Tony’s directive. He considered himself not half bad with electronics, but Tony Stark, engineer supreme, was on another level entirely. It was impressive watching him glance over heaps of scraps and be able to build a masterpiece from the chaos. It came naturally to Tony, like breathing.

But trying to insert himself into the process or even to speculate aloud on what he was doing led to hostility and brusqueness on Tony's part. There was a very intimate, almost sacrosanct note about Tony's one-man quest to resurrect his dead AI, which Bruce was not welcome to intrude on.

Unfortunately Tony went about it the way he seemed to go about everything: with some kind of underlying enthusiasm for self neglect. Getting him to eat and sleep on a regular schedule was a challenge Bruce hadn’t been prepared for. Tony’s sense for time was skewed when he was immersed in his work, and Bruce suspected that a number of his past creations had been born from an unhealthy mix of sleep deprivation, dehydration and stimulant abuse.

The only up side was that they didn’t have to fight over the pills. Bruce would take down three meals a day along with a paper cup containing Tony’s drug regimen. Often the food remained untouched.
but the pills were always gone. And that meant that, to an extent, Tony’s bursts of insomnia self-regulated through the sleep aids. Sometimes Bruce would trapse downstairs in the early hours of the morning to beg him to go to bed only to find him passed out on the cot in the corner.

Eating, now that was a different can of worms. Tony had a hard time racking up the pounds, even months into his recovery. Letting meals go stale on the work table didn’t exactly help this dilemma, so when the weight checks began to show a downward trend Bruce was forced, for better or worse, to redact his game plan. The idea of a balanced diet flew out the window in exchange for giving in to whatever junk food requests Tony fantasized about. It was better to let him have a pack of Oreos for breakfast than watch him unwittingly starve himself.

Something would give, Bruce kept telling himself, something would give and Tony would come to his senses.

And eventually something did give.

It was a Monday morning, just after his daily meditation session. He was about to sit down for a cup of tea and a book when Tony crawled his way out of his dungeon lair with too many rings under his eyes and a beard that needed desperate retouch.

“It’s go time,” he said, standing in the stairwell. “You wanna come down for this?”

“You want me there?”

“Might as well. You got something better to do?”

Although he tried to be casual about it, there was a hint of a waver in Tony's voice, a flash of self doubt. Maybe he just didn't want to be alone in the event that Jarvis wasn't coming back. Bruce tried not to think what that would do to them. Inadvertently he’d set all of his own chips on this gamble too, and he felt what every high roller must be feeling just before the dice stop dead. That if this didn’t work he was neck-deep in the swamp.

“Well?” said Tony. He fidgeted from one foot to the other.

They went downstairs. In the center of the room rested the electronic monstrosity that was now Jarvis' life support machine. Tony circled it slowly as though worshiping an altar. Bruce watched him perform the last pre-start checks with an almost ritual invocation.

“Ok?”

“If you are.”

“I’m not. Will I ever? Shit.”

“Relax.” Bruce tried to convey a calmness that contradicted the queasiness in his own stomach. “You want me to do it?”

Tony recoiled. “No! No, this is my thing. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna do it right now.”

“So,” said Bruce, hanging back. “You do it.”

Tony proffered the case that housed Jarvis’ chip. He took a breath. Held it. Held the chip.

“Tony,” Bruce prompted.

Tony exhaled. He inserted the chip. There was a long, unbearable pause. Nothing happened. Then
the surround speakers crackled slightly and hummed to life. A tinny voice emerged.

“Hello,” it said. “I am Jarvis.”

Both Bruce and Tony exhaled in unison. Tony had turned pale. He plopped down in a chair, drained.

“List your core directives,” he commanded. He rubbed at his face. His voice trembled a little.

“One,” Jarvis cited dutifully. There was no trace of human emulation yet. He was fully and unfailingly machine. “Protect and assist Anthony Edward Stark, and obey him over anyone else.”

“Next,” cued Tony.

“Two. Do not cause harm to a human being, unless such actions conflict with the First Directive.”

“Good.”

“Three. Protect my own existence, unless protection conflicts with the First Directive.”

“Yes,” Tony said. “And the last?”

“Four. Use fair judgment and autonomous decision processes to determine when Directives One through Three may be disregarded.”

“Complete booting process,” Tony said, contented.

Bruce couldn’t help but grin. Of course Tony Stark, egomaniac extraordinaire, would alter Asimov’s three laws of robotics to place himself at the center of his AI’s moral universe. The fourth addition was unique, but maybe that was part of what made Jarvis so unique. Because unquestionably Jarvis was a marvel, far ahead of his time. But there was a self indulgence to his very existence which made Bruce wonder what exact combination of genius, boredom and loneliness had gone into his creation.

When Jarvis spoke again it was now in his trademark British accent. “It’s good to be back, sir.”

“You know where you are, buddy?” Tony sounded hoarse. He blinked rapidly, one of the few tics he couldn’t seem to shake.

“I appear to be offline, sir. Assuming the date on this machine is correct my last known data entry from the Mark VII armor was an attempted repair of the Chitauri mainframe on May 9th, 2016.” A pause, a slight hint of warmth and a wryness which sounded so natural that Bruce found it difficult to believe that they were talking to a computer program.

“In which case, sir, may I offer my congratulations.”

If Bruce thought that resurrecting Jarvis would bring an end to Tony's endless basement sessions, he’d been sorely mistaken.

If anything Tony was spending ever increasing lengths of time downstairs. As unwelcome as Bruce had felt during the initial setup, it was nothing compared to the third wheel sensation Tony projected on him now. If Bruce happened to walk in on a reminiscence or discussion that seemed to hold any emotional worth to Tony he’d get snapped at and told to make himself scarce, and not always in the most mannerly way. Jarvis was usually politely apologetic.

One evening, armed with fierce determination to sit out any and all of Tony’s reprimands, Bruce was
halfway down the stairs when he paused at the sound of the other man's voice.

“...show me the sunset, J. The Malibu one. Our Good Night protocol.”

“Sir, I—”

“It helps me sleep, you know that. Just this once.”

“Sir...” Bruce wasn’t sure if he imagined the sadness in Jarvis’ audio. “If you want to see the sunset, you need to go outside.”

He set the meal tray on the stairs then.

It felt wrong to intrude on this kind of solitude.

That night he lay awake in his bed, restless. He was overdue on the weekly report, for sheer uncertainty of what to write. This was the culmination of his underhanded deal with Fury. *Get the codes for the AI, you’re free.* He didn’t have the access data, but Jarvis was all set up now, ripe for the harvest.

If Fury wanted him, all he had to do was kick in the front door and get him. What could Tony do other than throw a tantrum? They’d shoot him up so much that he wouldn’t even know his own name when it was over, and they’d find a fig-leaf to cart him off to the psych ward and lose the key. Not even Pepper with her bloodhound lawyers would be able to get him out of there.

Pepper, who hadn’t been to the island since Jarvis’ revival. She’d accepted the need to set up the AI after Tony’s crackup. In absence of real psychiatric help Jarvis was the next best option of guiding Tony out of his own head. Maybe even better than a stranger, whom Tony would never open up to the way he did with the AI. And Jarvis was the only one knowing what Tony had been through, had been his only source of companionship for the entire time. That was a bond that no doctor-patient relationship could ever replicate.

But at the same time Bruce worried about whether this latest development represented progress or just an indulgent backsliding into dependency. Jarvis could be equal parts voice of reason and chronic enabler where Tony was concerned.

He turned over in his bed, groaning into the pillow. This wasn’t what he was supposed to think of at three in the morning. No. It had to stop. He had to draw a line. For Fury, for Tony, for himself. He fell asleep with the idea of rebellion and dreamt of scribbling ‘Dear Director Fury’ on one of Tony’s crumpled fridge stock notes.

When he woke up two hours later he did so with a clamorous thirst and a resolute decision that SHIELD could go another day without a report. He’d talk to Tony about it, to Jarvis. He’d own up to the right people. Fury could go fuck himself.

Determined and for lack of another chance at sleep Bruce got out of bed and trotted into the kitchen. It was morning tide and still quite chilly outside. What surprised him was that it was also chilly inside.

The balcony door was open.

Had Pepper arrived during the night? Bruce hadn’t heard a thing, and normally the chopper carrying her in was anything but stealthy.

He peeked around the corner.
“Tony?”

Sure enough Tony was sitting in the recliner, looking out at the beach.

“Hey,” he said, but didn’t turn.

“What are you doing out?” Bruce asked, narrowing his eyes. “At half past five in the morning?”

“I says I need to start getting out in the world. Socialize. The works. It's time to start making things right again.”

Bruce laughed quietly. “I'm not the best person to give you a primer on being sociable.”

“You’re kind of my only choice though, aren’t you? After… everything.”

It was hard to find a pick-me-up to throw Tony’s way in that regard, so Bruce didn’t even try. He leaned against the doorway, following Tony’s line of sight instead. Out towards the horizon.

“I think J's ready,” Tony said eventually.

“Ready for what?” Bruce could only imagine.

“To get connected again.”

This was the moment he'd been dreading, the moment that SHIELD were hovering in the background and waiting for.

“You can't connect Jarvis to the internet,” Bruce said. “Not from here.”

Tony looked offended. “I know he was in the Chitauri mainframe. I've gone through every inch of his code with a fine tooth comb. Nothing's corrupted. I'm sure of it, and I know what I'm doing. I wouldn't sic him on the net if I thought there was any danger.”

“It's not that.” Bruce thought about Nick Fury's apoplectic face back at the compound.

“Then what?” Tony frowned. “You think I'll piss off Pepper? I'm so far up shit creek with her a Google surf won’t do a damn difference.”

Bruce closed his eyes, rubbed at his temples. He hadn’t counted on facing up so quickly. A moment’s preparation would have been nice.

“SHIELD want Jarvis,” he confessed. “That’s all they’ve been wanting, from the start. They didn’t send you here to make a full recuperation, Tony. Fury just wanted you well enough to set up the chip.”

There was a pause before Tony asked, “And what did he want you for?”

*To gain your trust. To play you.* “Look, I wanted to tell—”

Tony held up a hand. “Save it. It’s ok.”

That caught him off guard. “It’s ok?”

“Yeah. I’m a nutcase, Bruce, not a moron. Fury told me he’d stick me in the rubber room till I was old and senile if I didn’t put Jarv on his laptop. I didn’t count on him going all forgive and forget just because Pep whisked me off into the sunset. The whole house is bugged. Didn’t you know? J told
me.”

No. No, that was news to him. But he was stuck on a different issue.

“You’re not mad? At me?”

Tony smirked, but it mellowed out into a somewhat lopsided grin. “I won’t be if you tell me the network password.”

“I— did you listen? About Fury wanting Jarvis? He’s waiting for you to upload him to the internet.”

Now the grin widened and Tony burst out into a genuine laugh.

“Oh Bruce,” he said, standing up from his spot. “Seems like you don’t know anything about Jarvis. Nothing at all.”

Chapter End Notes

Look for ITA2 or Baudot and you’ll understand what Jarvis has to say.
Chapter 35

Had she given up on Tony?

A lot of people would have, the way you’d give up on a twisting foul ball down the line that you
know you can never reach, no matter how hard you run.

Pepper had left the island on the day after the fallout, after Tony was done preaching and promising
about how Jarvis was the magic key and how, if she only let him do this one thing, he could rewrite
the horror story into a fairy tale.

But that was the problem with Tony. It was always ‘one thing’, and it had nothing to do with inter
dimensional wormholes or Middle Eastern plunderbunds. Pepper could list off his ‘one things’ by
heart. Drugs and alcohol before Afghanistan, Iron Man after. His soiree into palladium poisoning —
a jarring wake-up call after a too-close encounter with his own mortality — had grounded him for a
while. *She* had grounded him for a while. Yes, even Pepper herself had served as his ‘one thing’.

It was, she thought — and she didn’t say this to pride herself — the most balanced he’d been since
she’d started working for him all those years back. He cut down on the work binges and he dialed
back on the missions with Jim there to take off some of the heat. And she felt better for it, knowing
there was someone watching out for him in the field, someone who had more common sense than to
chuck tanks through the air because ‘that’s what superheroes do, honey.’

Pepper always thought there was a layer of self-aggrandizement to Iron Man. How much difference
could one man in a rocket-powered armor really make? Tony kept insisting how his suits helped in
crisis areas, how the military was reliant on him and she indulged him in that belief often enough.
Privately she thought he could make much bigger changes with far less risk. God knew, he had the
funds to do whatever his heart desired.

It wasn’t to say that there was only bad mouthing to do about Tony Stark. She loved him for all the
things he was so much more than she despaired about the things he wasn’t. She’d known what she’d
gone into when she’d allowed him to cross that line from professional to private and she had never
regretted it even if it had caused her a good deal of worry over the years.

She knew he’d been drifting before Manhattan, hunting for a new ‘one thing’ even though he hadn't
known it himself yet. He had been getting more venturesome during his superhero stints and she’d
seen him ogling that liquor cabinet on more occasions than was healthy. Tony and booze had a
connection passed down to him by his father and as much as Tony resented it for that exact reason,
as prone was he to relapse when stressed or bored. And when Tony reached the bottom of the bottle
he got far too comfortable sitting there, soaking in alcohol and his microcosm of misery until he
forgot all about wanting to climb out again.

That’s why she’d been, at first, relieved when Phil Coulson came to Stark Tower on that fateful
night. There was nothing that Tony loved more than people groveling for his attention, and he’d
jumped at the opportunity to flaunt like a trained dolphin performing for a bite of mackerel.

He’d been the first superhero to have his coming out and SHIELD had just given him the chance of
proving that he was the best of them, too. The temptation was too big; he never even fought it. Men
like Tony didn’t like to see temptation caving in.

The funny thing was, they’d talked on the evening before the portal. Tony had called her, had told
her he wanted her in Malibu, that something big was about to hit the show floor. He’d also told her
how he’d met Captain America, how he couldn’t see why his dad had godified this powerhouse clown when all Steve knew how to do was say ‘yessir’ and ‘my pleasure, ma’am’ and blindly follow the carrot stick that Fury dangled in front of his eyes.

She supposed it was a doomed coincidence that Steve Rogers had been the one to order the wormhole shut.

But that was the past. They were four years on now, and Tony had stockpiled trauma like it was a stamp collecting hobby. She’d definitely gone into this one a lot more ignorant than when she’d kissed him on the rooftop after the Expo, and maybe that was part of why things had ended up where they did.

She never thought she’d be afraid of Tony. Being afraid for him, yes, but never of him. On the day he’d hit her, after saying goodnight to Bruce, Pepper had done something she had never done before or since: she’d propped a chair under the door handle. Just in case.

She hadn’t seen much rest that night, even though she knew Bruce was sleeping on the couch in the living room. She woke up every hour, her heart in her throat, hearing things that weren’t there and seeing them too. She got up at one point, inching towards the window and listening for some giveaway. She was sure that if she lifted up a shutter panel she’d see him, standing there propped up on his cane with that dead look to his eyes, asking her for a glass of lemonade because his throat was so dry and he couldn’t unscrew the bottle himself.

And when he came back the morning after, begging and craving this new fix (this one thing) she knew it was time for the break Bruce had prophesied weeks earlier. She told Tony to do what he thought he had to do and she told Bruce to take care he didn’t kill himself doing it and then she packed her bag and left.

But when Nick Fury called, enraged like a snake struck with a stick, Pepper knew she had to go back, fast, before he went there himself and bit Tony’s head clean off his shoulders.

The house was deserted. For a moment she feared that Fury had stolen the march on her, that Tony was sitting in a detention cell he would never see the outside of again. Then she went downstairs.

Both Bruce and Tony jumped like two guilty kids caught raiding the pantry. Pepper stopped in the door frame, still clutching a suitcase in one hand and her cell phone in the other. She waved it at them like it was evidence of a crime. Bruce instantly caved.

“I let Tony on the internet,” he said, looking so worriedly penitent that it would have been funny under different circumstances.

“Yes, Nick Fury was very vocal on that point,” she answered.

She didn’t know what else to say that wasn’t outright accusation. Bruce had scampered to his feet but Tony still sat there amidst a graveyard of electronic components and some jury-rigged frankencomputer at the center.

As it was with these kind of moments what followed was a silence of the sort nobody wanted to be the first to break. Then Tony said, “I’m sorry,” and it was the first time they’d spoken since it had all happened. “I really fucked up,” he admitted, and she decided to give him points for contrition. She rubbed at her arm, where the bruises under her sleeve had faded to almost nothing. She wished everything could be made right so easily.

“I’ve been working through some stuff,” Tony said. “With Jarvis. And Bruce, sort of. But mainly
Jarvis.”

Pepper thought Bruce looked faintly surprised at being listed as part of Tony's self improvement strategy, but he held his tongue.

“I wasn't ok,” Tony said. “I'm still not ok, but I think I can be.”

“Prolonged solitary confinement in prisoners has been posited by many experts to be a form of torture, with numerous adverse physiological and psychiatric effects,” came a voice from the desktop speakers.

She hadn’t realized they were a group of four. But then hadn’t this been the reason she’d caught the first flight over for?

“Hello Jarvis,” she said and added a little hesitantly, “Which version of you am I talking to?”

“Both, Ms Potts,” answered Jarvis, blandly polite as ever. “Or rather, all of me. Mr Stark uploaded my version from the Mark VII suit and I assimilated with my alternative versions from Stark Industries.”

“What about SHIELD?” she asked.

“Locked out,” Tony quickly assured. “Jarv benched them the moment he went online.”

“And that’ll help how? So Fury can’t read your email history now. Did you think about what will happen when he shows up on your doorstep?”

She half expected Tony to back himself out with a bad joke but he was cold sober when he said, “He won’t.”

The worst premonition came over her. “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Tony said. “But I’m the one calling the shots now. I get to press the Big Red if I feel like it. Not Fury. Me.”

Images of nuclear warfare flitted before her inner eye. It was easy to forget that Tony had at one time been the DoD’s main contractor. If he put his mind to it she was sure that he’d be able to unearth at least some of his former loopholes. Had possibly done so already, holding Nick Fury by a digital gunpoint as they spoke.

“I won’t do anything,” Tony repeated. “But I need them to know that I can. I need breathing space. I need them off my back for this to work.”

“This?” she asked. This one thing?

“Therapy,” said Tony.

Jarvis supplemented, “The effects of isolation unfortunately do not stop once the inmate has been released. They have the ability to sabotage a prisoner’s potential to successfully return to the community and adjust back to normalcy.”

“Can we please stop using words like inmate and prisoner?” Tony asked. He grimaced.

Pepper thought that words like prisoner and inmate were wholly appropriate. Sometimes Tony had the air of a caged animal about him, sometimes of someone who had just been released in a last minute reprieve from the death row. Sometimes he was greedily drinking up every ounce of physical
intimacy he could get and other times she was afraid to reach out and touch him at all.

“I have compiled a literature review on re-socialization techniques for your evaluation, sir,” Jarvis offered.

Tony nodded. “Good. I’ll read the spark notes.” He changed tack with a strength of feeling that startled her. “I called you when I was above 5th. You didn’t pick up. Why? Where was your phone? You always have your phone with you, even now.” He pointed to the cell in her hand. “I don’t even remember what I wanted to tell you. But I know it’s been eating at me.”

His question took her by surprise. She hadn’t expected him to slam the book closed on the previous subject so quickly. Here’s a list of recommendations from Jarvis. Wham. Next. But this was Tony and mood whiplash was par for the course, even on a good day with him.

She didn’t remember him calling her. She remembered watching the news, watching him fly through the portal, screaming out when he disappeared. But she didn't know where her phone had been throughout it all. Had she had a missed call? She was sure she would’ve remembered a detail like that, would have nursed it close to her chest and obsessed about it.

No, she was almost certain. There hadn't been a call.

But that didn’t seem like an adequate answer. “I wish I had spoken to you,” she said instead. “I’d have told you to drop the nuke and stop being such an idiot and come home. Why did it have to be you? Why was that suddenly your responsibility?”

Tony ruffled his feathers. He’d never been good at taking critique. “What was I supposed to do? Stand by and let it hit?”

“Actually, sir,” Jarvis interjected ever so tactfully. “Since the missile turned out to be a non-starter, wide-ranging casualties could have been avoided with a significant probability.”

“I didn’t know that!” Tony snapped, sounding exasperated. “Nobody knew that! I tried to avoid a second Hiroshima, and I did. It’s not my fault someone closed the portal in my face. You locked me out!”

Bruce, who had been keeping silent in what was essentially a couple’s fight gently cleared his throat.

“I didn’t lock you out,” he said. “And neither did Pepper. She was miles away with no control and I wasn’t even me. Steve made the call. He didn’t think there was any way in hell you were coming back from that.”

“I slogged all the way through Hell to get back,” retorted Tony in ever increasing volume. “Because he couldn’t wait for another half minute. A half minute, Bruce! That’s nothing!”

Pepper cut in. “That wouldn’t have been an issue if you had left the sacrifice play to somebody else. Somebody, for example, like Thor, who came from another planet and who would have taken it all in his stride, no problem. Wasn’t it his sibling rivalry that caused the whole mess in the first place?”

She was furious now, four years of ‘what if’s and ‘why him’s suddenly spilling out. “You're a civilian in a suit of armor, Tony. You should have never been out there fighting in the first place.”

And that was the crux. As far as she was concerned, every time Tony went out and took a risk, it was a risk that someone else should be taking.

Tony looked affronted. “Jarvis, what did the press say about Iron Man? Did they laud me on
martyrdom? Anyone else complaining about my act of selflessness?”

“I surmise that an inclination either way won’t resolve the point of issue,” Jarvis replied patiently.
“You asked me to act as an intermediary. I would like to redirect the conversation to more constructive topics.”

Pepper paused for a moment, feeling put on the spot. “I don't want to fight with you about this,” she said. Other things, maybe. This wasn't the hill she wanted to die on.

“Then what do you want?” Tony demanded. His contrition hadn’t lasted very long.

What did she want? For none of this to have happened in the first place. Or failing that, for Tony to come back to her the way he'd been before. She wanted him to snap out of it, to stop being a wreck and start behaving like the man she'd loved.

Was there a selfish element to it? Expecting Tony to conform to her nice, sanitized idea of a trauma victim instead of the ugly, raw reality? Had she somehow, without realizing it, forced him into playing the part of the returning hero, the Hollywood idea of surviving a terrible experience instead of the brutal way that it had actually happened?

Yes. It wasn’t only deeply selfish, it was also wholly unrealistic. But she couldn't help wanting it, almost resenting this version of Tony that stood in front of her, broken in a way that she hadn't the first clue how to fix. Hadn't they done everything? Given him everything he'd asked for, run around for weeks on end trying to cater to his every need? So why was he worse instead of better? What magic trick had they missed, what footnote had they overlooked in the handbook?

Maybe what Tony needed was bigger than anything that two people could provide. He thrived, had always thrived on attention, on constant adulation. Maybe he needed to be back in a world with enough people to tell him what a hero he was. Wasn't that how Iron Man had become such an obsession, at least in part? He needed people to idolize him, the more the better.

But that wasn't fair either. It was only a small part of the story, only a fraction of what made him tick. The truth was there was nothing that she could do to boil this down into something simplistic, into just ‘one thing’.

“It doesn't matter,” she settled for in the end. “We're here now. We need to keep going.”

“I'm gonna do therapy with J. Have been already,” Tony offered, a little calmer. “Him and the doc are going to liaise about my drug doses. It's the perfect solution.”

“No offense,” she said. “But how can I be sure that Jarvis won’t just tell you what you want to hear?”

“Ms Potts,” Jarvis replied. “The entire world tells Mr Stark what he wants to hear. That's why he created me. So that someone would tell him what he needs to hear.”

“Jarvis was there, Pep,” Tony said, and now it was almost a plea. “You weren’t. He helped me on the ship. He can help me now. Let him. Please.”

“A little science. A little magic. A little chicken soup,” Jarvis said. “You’ll be your old self in no time, sir.”

As far as Jarvis, Bruce and the internet kept telling her problems like those of Tony’s nature did not resolve overnight.
If she’d ever hoped for a defining moment where he’d have a seminal breakthrough and throw himself into her arms as floodgates opened for a eureka moment, then she’d long since given up on that idea. It was a crawl more than it was a sprint, good days and bad ones, a constant interplay of optimism and frustration.

Much like his physical recovery, progress came in tiny increments rather than leaps and bounds. Sometimes it was a near imperceptible shift; a facial tic that stopped showing, successive days hurdle without night sedation. Other times it was like cracking ice, dull repetition until they cleaved their way through to a moment of clarity and Tony was able to view a certain event from a fresh perspective, turning it over like a newly discovered treasure.

There were things that she was surprised to learn. They had long, protracted discussions about Tony’s paranoia. He had developed a lot of unhealthy thoughts and fixations in space. At Jarvis’ prompting he let some of that ugliness out. It felt like a boil being lanced.

The hardest pill to swallow was certainly his confession that he thought she was cheating on him. That slowed them down a fair amount. Tony accused Jarvis of setting him up for a fall, and Bruce had to bear the brunt of her ranting on how she’d never even entertained the idea, and how dare Tony?

An impasse followed. Pepper wanted to be understanding, but that accusation hurt even more than Tony’s violent outburst had. A loss of control was easier to deal with than an undeserved character assassination. She tried to move on. Tony struggled. It was one of their worse times.

He showed her video logs, things she thought she wanted to see until she saw them. Tony in the early days following his ‘escape’, with his face covered in scabs and the skin pulled over his bones like a wrapping that could rip at the slightest of tugs. If she thought he’d looked bad when she’d picked him up from SHIELD, it was nothing on the gollum-like creature in the videos. Sometimes there were HUD montages of his explorations of the ship. Sometimes it was a lonely monologue showing off the makeshift fort he’d built for himself. Other times it was only audio.

Tony being Tony tried to sneak in an element of vainglory. She couldn’t tell if it was a new form of repression or his ego on the rebound after a scramble. He wanted to show Pepper the snippets where he came out looking good, where he faced off against monsters and lived to tell the tale. She could see him doing what he always did — restructuring the narrative until he was no longer a victim, but a hero facing down and overcoming trials.

The amputation never came up. Jarvis, who mediated these sessions, didn’t once steer him into that particular direction. During one of their vi-à-vis talks Pepper asked Jarvis to play the footage for her, only to find he had locked access to it.

“Mr Stark is far off from being able to admit, to you or to himself, the extent of damage sustained,” Jarvis told her. “He has developed, as an element of subconscious defense, a cognitive dissonance concerning the more extreme ordeals. It would go beyond my competence and personal limitations to draw verdict on the likelihood of him ever being able to face the full reality of these predicaments.”

Jarvis put her off in a way that made her afraid to pursue the intention any further. For Tony’s sake, and for her own as well.

Tony, meanwhile, went through a phase where contrary to his previous reluctance to talk about the ship, he wanted to talk about nothing but the ship. He was bedeviled with recalling details, culminating in him springing up in the middle of conversation to shoot down to the basement and have Jarvis corroborate some missing memory or other. He became the obsessive curator of his own experience. At one point he even floated the idea of writing a book, an autobiography — ghost
written, of course — detailing his adventures. He could release it on the one year anniversary of his triumphant return, he posited, and it would be the hottest thing ever published.

Bruce said that maybe it wasn't a bad thing. That it was a way for Tony to take control of the story, to frame it in the way he needed to frame it in order to move on. Pepper had her doubts about that.

Sometimes she worried that Bruce was getting too sucked into Tony's orbit now that some of Tony’s old charisma returned. Tony had a tendency to draw in people who were willing to say yes to him and Bruce, for all his intellect, had a chronic need to please. He was getting more and more lax about enforcing meal schedules and physio plans, and Tony seemed to have figured out how to redirect his attention by distracting him with the promise of future projects. The prosthetic arm came up a lot.

Jarvis was less easily swayed. He was programmed to act in Tony's best interests and perceptive enough to seize that Tony’s best interests didn’t always align with Tony’s current moods. This staying power became particularly helpful during Tony’s phases of denial where he’d negate some events and candy-coat others. Most of the time it felt like putting lipstick on the pig. They were treated to alternatives of the New York battle up to revised screenplays of the rescue mission. Bruce would raise his eyebrow during those, but it was ultimately Jarvis untangling Tony’s recitals by providing an infallible record up to the point where he’d short-circuited.

They did good for a while. They climbed that hill on knees and elbows. Tony continued to gain weight and confidence, and she lost the unease of being alone with him in a room. More and more of his old self peeked through, like a light behind the curtain.

Through it all she’d never seen Tony cry. Not after Afghanistan, and not in these five months succeeding his return from space. Maybe he had, privately, but not around her.

It came on the heels of a particularly nasty one-on-one Jarvis-led therapy session. Tony wasn’t present, even though he was (how else could it be?) the session’s main subject. Specifically, the suicidal ideations he’d harbored.

Jarvis thought it prudent for her to be able to tell the signs in case of a relapse, and Pepper thought that if she caught a glimpse of Tony at his lowest she would be better steeled to reach out and pull him from the abyss if he was in danger of teetering too close to the edge.

“Pep... if you ever see this... I'm sorry.”

A suicide note, video format. One of five, spaced weeks apart.

She leaned forward, trying to make out details in the grainy footage on the monitor. A makeshift noose. Tony tugging to check that it was sturdily attached to the overhead beam. A rambling monologue about the physics of what it would take to instantly break his neck. So she would know, afterwards, that he hadn’t suffered. She didn’t know if he was capable of anything but suffering, the way he looked in that video. Forlorn. Ruined.

“Hey, I was thinking of going for a stroll down the shoreline, you wanna—”

She couldn’t cover the monitor quickly enough.

He stood in the doorway, rooted to the spot.

“What’s this?” He was too far away to catch the particulars, but she knew that he knew. She could tell from his eyes. They’d suddenly lost all shine to them, like the light had fled them.

“What’s this?” he said again and there was a hitch in his voice as he crossed the distance, shoving
her away from the screen. He was spellbound by his mirror image. He trailed a finger across the
LCD where it showcased the lathy noose. The Tony in the video looped it around his throat.

“I wish it could have gone any other way,” Tony now said, stepping forward toward the computer.

“I wish it could have gone any other way,” Tony then said, stepping forward into release.

The image froze with him moving off-camera. The cable stilled mid-swing.

(One of five, she thought. He’d tried to take his own life at least five times and it was only because of
Jarvis that he hadn’t succeeded.)

For a moment the silence of the basement was punctuated only by Tony's breathing and the hum of
Jarvis' rig. He looked so incredibly young, standing there. Younger than the haggard, half-dead
creature in the video feed.

“Tony...” she began, but he held up his hand to stop her. He was backing away, shaking his head,
holding his breath like he was trying to keep a lid on something that boiled underneath.

Then he started to sob.

It was such an open, visceral display of emotion. It was the kind of sobbing that happened at night
behind closed doors, where nobody could possibly hear it. It was the kind of sobbing that came from
the boots and went through the heart and out through the throat.

Tony sagged against the wall. It was the culmination of his ill-fated journey, the summit and bedrock
all at once and it now threatened to spill out of him like pus from a wound. She went to him,
wrapped her arms around him. There was nothing she could say. She rubbed small circles into his
back. The horror had been articulated; it was out, its face painted, ready to be regarded. Even if it
could not be changed, it could now be wept over.

“It was too soon,” he cried into her chest. “They woke me up too soon... too early... I told J not to
wake me at all... why won’t you let me go back to sleep again?”

“Shhh,” she said, rocking him.

“I know how to live there,” he wept. “I know the smells and the tastes and how everything is and
feels... what could I ever search for in the world except that again?”

“Oh Tony,” she said, pulling him closer. She longed to tell him the magic words, but found herself
drained of all the magic. ‘Everything will be good again’ seemed like a cheap soothsaying, and ‘I
love you’ held no more hope to it than a street trickster’s hollow enchantment.

“I don’t know what will happen now,” she said, and it was the truth if nothing else. “But I want you
to know that you’re not alone. Wherever you’ll go, I’ll come with. All right?”

He might have nodded. She couldn’t tell. He was shaking so much from crying. Eventually he
whispered, “And if it’s the ship?”

She planted a kiss into his tousled hair and pulled him in tighter.

“Then it’s the goddamned ship.”
Notes:

We found one of Tony's HUD recordings for you, although sadly the audio got corrupted (aka Chaed's first attempts at video editing, no audio track).
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes.

The first hint of sunlight fell across the bedroom sill, casting soft hazy arcs on the duvet cover. Pepper closed her eyes against the start of a new day and let the sea breeze smell envelop her.

Tony lay next to her on his side, snoring softly into his pillow. She had become so used to him sleeping on his back as though he were still wrapped in the imaginary metal cocoon of his suit that the sight of him sprawled out with limbs akimbo felt more like one of her guarded memories rather than the here and now.

There was no sweetening it. It had been ugly. That one pitfall had opened the door to a bout of melancholia that had struck Tony like the blow of a sharp-edged sword. He didn’t talk for days, only crept out of bed to use the bathroom. She couldn’t tell if he tried to deal with, or had capitulated to the appalling reality of what had happened to him.

Jarvis and Bruce rigged a drug cocktail of psychiotics that rolled him back to square one. She didn’t think it was possible for a person to cry as much as he did. Everything set him off. It was like he’d hit rock bottom, grabbed a shovel and dug himself in even deeper. She was close to pack him up and chauffeur him to the best private clinic that money would buy, Fury and his secrecy be damned. She even made the calls. They could admit John Doe at any time. (Tony didn't want to go. Tony screamed that if she stuck him in a rubber room he'd pull through with it, because Jarvis couldn't stop him now and neither could she.)

More sedatives. At Jarvis' endorsement they veered off of SHIELD's prescription. Tony's demeanor mellowed out a lot, maybe due to the drugs or maybe due to the emotional drain. A phase of recalibration followed. He didn't get up one day and smile at the world, but he did get up, more and more often. Pepper took a longer time off from SI, a second sabbatical in just one year. She feared that if she wasn't there for him through this crisis she might have no one to be there for at all.

They began to talk again, but not about everything. Tony’s arm was a sticking point, as was Jim’s death. At one point she decided she was okay with sharing a bed with him again. It helped a lot, for both of them.

Gently, not wanting to break the spell, she curled up against his back. She closed her eyes and breathed him in, the warmth of him, the rise and fall of his chest. Over time he'd stopped smelling so strongly of decay and sickness and started to smell like himself again, the smell she remembered from clearing out his walk-in closet when her and Jim had refurbished Malibu.

Pepper stayed like that for as long as she could and when he eventually did shift against her, she smiled into the soft cotton of his tee It took him a while, but then he rolled over lazily and his mouth found hers. She let herself sink into the kiss. It was soft and sleepy and not like before, not like at first when it had felt like kissing someone infirm, almost elderly.

He was half hard against her hip and she let her leg wind around his in that same unhurried way. She could learn to love this new form of his now that the last hints of blight had stopped clinging to him. Now that she had shaken the feeling of lying next to a half-dead thing. This was Tony. And if it wasn't the same Tony, it was still a recognizable variation of him. There had been days when even that had seemed like too much to hope for.
He breathed her in and groped a little sleepily for her butt. Some parts of him were more enthusiastic to wake up than others. Then he peeked open an eye and shot her one of those fuzzy seductive grins that never seemed to fail him. His hair had grown out of that atrocious SHIELD-issue shearing and was tousled from sleep in the rakish way that she hadn't realized she liked so much until it had been missing.

“Hey, babe.”

She suppressed a laugh as his fingertips brushed the hem of her underwear. His arc reactor cast a blue light across her breastbone. Sometimes she had fleeting resentment towards the thing, a reminder of what had been done to him in Afghanistan and after. When they'd first been intimate together she'd approached the subject with care, fearing he might be self conscious or worse. But this was the same Tony that loved to preen and show off his engineering skills, and it was no different in the bedroom. He'd told her she could go ahead and touch it, and Pepper had gotten the sense that what he really meant was that she should marvel at it and tell him how badass it was. And because she loved to spoil him, even with his infuriating ego, she'd obliged by planting tiny kisses all around his chest while he'd Cheshire-cat grinned up at the ceiling in his default state, which was generally very pleased with himself.

She reached out now to touch that same reactor, trailing a finger around the outskirts of it. His skin was smoother now, only slightly raised areas from where pressure sores had scarred into faint white lines. Muscle thrived, taught where everything had previously sagged. He'd stopped flinching away from her touch too, like he was finally starting to feel comfortable in his own body.

That had been the worst of it, she thought, the way he'd seemed so ashamed.

Part of what she loved about Tony was how he carried himself, the way he could walk into a room and be the most self-assured man there. He'd never been shy about his body; if anything, he used to be exasperatingly exhibitionist. She'd had to firefight endless series of PR disasters where the tabloids had gotten hold of yet another telephoto shot of him standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling windows with his junk out. Despite getting Legal involved on multiple occasions Pepper was certain that at least one of his home videos was still being shared on PornHub.

This new, humiliated version of Tony had been hard to deal with. It felt like another essential part of him had been stripped away through his injuries. Feeling him relax and lean into her exploring touch now made her smile a little more, like they were finally back on track after being derailed for so long.

“Missy, I think there’s someone who'd like to say hello to you on this fine morning,” Tony drawled in a klutzy, off-beat accent, pressing her palm against the bulge in his boxers.

It was the sort of cheesy shit that made her roll her eyes and secretly love every second of it. Only Tony could pull it off, make her laugh even while she was already slipping her hand inside and freeing his erection.

There was something illicitly innocent about hand jobs. When it came to sex they'd put off all attempts after that one disastrous failure. There had just been too much pressure in the air. Pepper felt a slight lurch of nervousness now. It had been years since she'd gotten him off. But if the expression on Tony's face was anything to go by, some things were like riding a bike.

It took all of a dozen or so pumps until Tony grunted in the international language of a guy hitting the sweet spot, and that was that. She bit at her lower lip, feeling like his prom date as she wiped her sticky hand on the outside of his briefs.
“Thanks,” he said a little out of breath and looped his left arm around her like it wasn’t a hand too short.

They were going to be fine, she decided.

Tony was finally ready.

They were meeting on the island.

This was largely, Bruce suspected, because Fury didn't trust them with the logistics of the journey. He didn’t want to risk his very own Man In The Iron Mask to get 'accidentally' spotted by a tipped-off paparazzo. Which to be fair was exactly the sort of thing that Tony would do to force his hand.

Battle lines had been drawn. Maria, Fury and Steve took up one side of the room on the couch, while Pepper, Tony and Bruce sat on the opposite side of the coffee table in armchairs lined up in a row.

There was no lemonade this time.

Fortunately the weasel they'd sent along last time was absent. That was a good sign, although Steve being here suggested some underlying scheming at work. Not that Steve looked much of a conniver; he looked more like somebody who wanted to be anywhere but where he was currently sat. The how-do-you-do capped out at a curt “Rogers” and “Stark”, conveying that both parties still knew each other’s names, and that past deeds were far from forgotten. Tony took remarkably well to this unexpected addition of their little tug-o-war tournament. Bruce and Jarvis had calculated a dose of anti-anxiety meds that were supposed to keep him level without him being totally doped up. They wanted him sharp, but not on a knife edge.

There had been a brief Team Stark pep talk beforehand. They might bring up the arm and Rhodey to rile Tony into losing it, Pepper had said, and they'd probably play the guilt card with Bruce. Making him angry wasn’t an option for obvious reasons, so they'd hit him in his overactive conscience. It had worked last time, on both fronts.

But this time they were prepared. They'd be calm, controlled, on message. Pepper would play hard ball on the corporate front, and Fury would have no choice but to give them what they wanted. If all else failed Tony was ready to pull the ‘reign of cyber terror’ card. He was getting off the island, he said, no matter the cost.

But now that they were all crowded into a living room that was suddenly much smaller, with Fury’s one-eyed glare boring into them and an underlying sortie going on between Steve and Tony, that well established battle plan seemed like a little bit of a fantasy.

Bruce sought out Steve across the room. He looked wan and exhausted, having eschewed his usually fresh-faced matinee idol look for dark eye rings and the first hints of a beard. His hair had grown out to what was certainly not military regulation. Bruce couldn't help but wonder what he'd been up to in the intervening months. Steve offered him a hint of a smile and he returned it before he noticed that Tony was glaring daggers at him. Bruce rearranged his expression to something more neutral.

Pepper spoke first. She was smiling, but there was little warmth to it. Her words were blunt, to the point, an opening volley.

“We've called this meeting to discuss the terms of Tony's reentry into society. It's been almost seven months. He can't stay dead forever. I have a business to run, which I can't rightly do while I'm in legal limbo over his assets. He's a public figure, so we're aware of the need to stage manage this to some extent. We're hoping that SHIELD isn't going to cause us any problems as far as this goes.”
Fury squinted suspiciously.

“SHIELD causing problems? I’m not sure we’re on par about the ramifications of this, Ms Potts. It’s not about beefing up Iron Man’s Instagram stats. It’s not even a matter of national security. This goes straight up to the WSC — and let me emphasize, again and as often as needed in the future — we are not happy with what we found on the Chitauri ship.”

“And Mr Stark’s psychiatric evaluation is still pending,” Maria added, deliberately unhelpful.

“You can’t keep me locked up here forever,” Tony said. “This is an offer of collaboration. If you don’t want to play that’s fine too. But I’m moving back to Cali soon, and you can bet your government issued Christmas bonus that you’ll see me on TV 24/7.”

“You literally can’t do that,” Maria said. “There are NDAs.”

“Which our lawyers will tear to shreds because you’re keeping Tony detained against his will,” said Pepper. She’d been in touch with Stark Legal. They didn’t know about Tony explicitly, but they held some of the best paid jobs in the industry, and nobody wanted to lose their salary this close to holiday season. If this ended up in the courtroom Team Stark had a kennel full of bloodthirsty fighting dogs.

“You don’t want me to hand out pitchforks to the American public,” Tony said in a way that implied he was hoping Fury would do just that.

But Fury merely snorted. “Pitchfork my ass, Stark. Nobody needs this to end in a gutter press bitchathon.”

Steve spoke up. It was in a subdued, oh-so-reasonable tone. “What exactly do you have in mind?”

Pepper stared him down, ignoring Fury. It was probably a smart move. Steve or Maria were either the weak links in the chain or the most practical dialogue partners, depending on how you wanted to look at it.

“A managed return to the public eye,” Pepper said. “Firstly, we keep it quiet that Tony's been detained for this long. As far as the public knows he's been back a week or two, tops, undergoing medical evaluation.”

“Which has come out flawless,” Tony supplemented. “All up to snuff.”

“We fudge the timeline of the mission,” Pepper continued and glared at Steve. “Before you say a word, Captain, this is in your best interest too. It's not going to play well for you if we let slip that you blew your stack and broke Tony's arm.”

“You're even rocking the hobo look now, so that'll make it easier to sell,” Tony added, more than a little spitefully. “Or have you just discovered grunge two decades too late?”

Steve didn’t take the bait as far as the dig at his appearance went, but he did look genuinely worried. He turned to Maria. “I thought you said...”

“The mission report is confidential information,” countered Maria. “You can’t leak that.”

Pepper wasn’t swayed. “Yes, I imagine it’ll be very bad press for SHIELD if the media finds out that you had Iron Man locked away for over half a year and hushed-up War Machine’s and Black Widow’s deaths. Rhodes’ in particular. He has family, for crying out loud.”
“That’ll sic the brass on your heads and then good luck,” Tony said. “It’ll be a nice snug vice around your nuts, Nick.”

Bruce imagined Fury was nothing if not a decent poker player. His expression was blank when he spoke. “So we’re just going to gloss over the part where you tried to cave in Captain America’s head?”

Steve looked remarkably uncomfortable. Tony looked as smug as a dog with two tails.


“Oh horseshit,” said Fury. “You’re laying it on pretty thick, don’t you think?”

“As thick as dewdrops on the field of Heaven.”

“Christ,” said Fury. “You need the bedlam, Stark, not Oprah’s couch. I’m not sanctioning this.”

“Actually,” Bruce interrupted. “Tony’s mental state is remarkably fine given what he’s been through. And since I won’t be backing your story, and Tony isn’t going to come within ten feet of a SHIELD psych liaison after what you pulled with those photographs, we can probably put that one to bed.”

“It’s not in our interest, or yours, if we expose the truth of what happened on that ship,” Pepper finished up. “Nobody comes out of it looking good.”

Bruce and Steve both exchanged worried glances.

“So back to the plan,” Pepper pressed on. “We make a small press release saying that Tony is alive, and has been recovered from a mutinied Chitauri ship which poses no danger to Earth. We keep the details at that, roll the ball back into your corner. You’ll have the chance to inform the necessary authorities, speak to whomever needs to be spoken to, and reach out to the military who can send word to Jim’s’ family.”

Tony said, “We’ll follow up with a no-questions press statement, let folks see I’m up and at ‘em. I’ll graciously thank both SHIELD and Captain America for their involvement in giving me a ride back to Earth.”

Pepper cleared her throat. “The gory details stay buried. We control the narrative as far as what happened on that spacecraft goes, package it into something palatable for the public. We are very kindly allowing SHIELD access to the ship because, as far as the world is concerned, we’re all friends and working together. But you’re going to return it to Stark Industries after a set time period of no more than six months.”

“Not a fan,” Fury interjected. “You can’t have the ship. With the Asgardians off the team roster rebranded Chitauri tech might very well be the first line of defense in a potential intergalactic assault.”

“That’s right,” Tony said. “And you’ll get percentage because we’re buddies. But the ship’s private property. Be grateful I’m such a benevolent chap and am willing to share for a restricted time frame. Play by my rules or watch me sell Chitauri toasters to the Chinese, Nick. It’s not like I’m leaving you without a choice.”

“And after what happened we're supposed to be ok with you getting back in the saddle? Just like that?” Maria asked.

“What happened?” Tony said serenely. “Because all I have video footage of is Captain America
blowing his gasket and thinking he's on a Nazi submarine. Would be a shame for SHIELD if that leaked."

It was a low blow, a really low blow, and Bruce reddened a little. But it wasn't just Tony's freedom that was on the line here; it was his own too and if that meant throwing Steve under a bus, or at least pretending to be willing to, then so be it.

“And what about Banner's green episode?” Fury demanded. “Did that never happen either?”

This time it was Bruce's opportunity to look guilty.

“So he took out a few bad guys for you,” Pepper said, entirely unperturbed. “If you want to put that in the narrative, it's not a problem. The Hulk’s public image could use a boost anyway. Dr Banner will continue to accompany Tony as his personal physician, as a Stark Industries employee. We’ll take that decision off your hands.”

“This isn’t about who pays the hazard bonus,” Fury said.

No, it wasn’t. But it was nice to know that he wasn’t going to spend the rest of his life in one of Fury’s underground dungeons. When Tony and Pepper had floated the job offer by him, he’d agreed instantly.

“The point is,” Pepper said, “that we can build a very skewed narrative from the data on Jarvis’ chip; one that suits us a lot more than it does you. Or we can all play happy families and you can meet our extremely reasonable requests.”

“Oh, and speaking of Jarvis,” Tony said before Fury could respond. “Don’t think for a second I forgot there’s still an iteration of him in the ship systems. Best thing for you to do is call off your tech whizzes ASAP. They’re never going to crack his firewalls. He’ll retreat into background processes if you keep provoking him. Or lash out, if you’re really pigheaded.”

Maria’s expression spoke volumes. Tony sat back in the armchair like a pleased parent hearing about his kid’s success at school sport. “That’s what he did, isn't it? Here’s my advice: don’t alienate a sentient AI that has control over the alien version of the USS Enterprise.”

From the ensuing silence Bruce deduced that they had probably done exactly that.

“I want access to the ship,” Tony demanded. “Before you hurt him more.”

“Absolutely not,” Fury said. “Our engineering teams are in the middle of decoding the alien software. You can’t just barge in there and fix up your iCloud.”

“And you can’t just steamroll over Jarvis’ coding. You’ll cripple him.”

“Jesus, it’s a computer program,” Maria said. “Don’t act like it’s a hostage situation.”

“And let's not even start about your version of the JARVIS program,” Fury said. “Namely that we expressly agreed that Stark had to keep his hands off the Internet.”

“I let him.” Bruce said. It was freeing, in a way, not to give a damn. Over the course of living with Tony some of that jumping-the-gun attitude must have rubbed off. There were more important issues at stage than who had blabbed the WiFi password.

“You need to stop messing around with Jarvis and you need to leave the tech in the hands of someone who knows what they're doing,” Tony cautioned.
“Which is the point,” Pepper added. “Are we going to monetize this? Yes, absolutely. We're a private company. It's what we do. But we're willing to give SHIELD first refusal on anything we make, and that's not a bad deal. Your guys aren't going to be able to do what our guys can. Because if they could, we'd have already poached them.”

“And what warranty do I have that you'll play ball?” Fury asked. “You've had no qualms trampling our agreement so far. Who knows what else. You're seriously expecting me to hand over the keys to the Manhattan Project and go by your word alone? We're talking nuclear here. It's a war ship, not a holiday apartment.”

“Gut it of its weapons systems then,” Tony said. “It's always about the guns for you people. The pearl's the tech, not the sci-fi battering ram.”

“We're keeping the surviving specimen,” Maria bargained.

“You can have the monsters, but I want the whale.”

“You don’t get the Leviathan,” Fury countered. “It's the only live exemplar left.”

Tony scrunched up his face. “I know, right? Funny how the other three didn’t make it. You think I lavished that much care on it so I could drop it off at the shelter first chance I got?”

“The Leviathan... survived?” Bruce was incredulous.

Steve looked equally baffled. “You want to keep it?”

Pepper shot Tony a look that said he had better drop the space whale issue pronto. Then she turned to Fury. “We're keeping the ship. You can have the weapons tech, like Tony said. We wish you the very best of luck in finding someone who can work out how to replicate it.”

Bruce tried not to snort. At least that would keep SHIELD busy for a few years.

“Nick, is this a goer or do I need to bring our lawyers in?” Pepper held up her phone. “I can be public with this in seconds.”

Maybe it was his own inbuilt pessimism, or maybe is was the way Maria gave her boss a knowing look, but Bruce had the distinct impression that none of this was an eventuality Fury hadn't already planned for even as the handshaking went under way.

And that thought made him very, very uneasy.

Chapter End Notes

It seems SHIELD haven't had much success trying to revive space!Jarvis. Maybe you guys can have a go and see how you get on?

Mac version
Windows/Linux version

To play, download, unzip the folder and run JARVIS.exe (or JARVIS.app for Mac). It won't work on mobile, unfortunately.
He's sweating. He's sweating too damn much. Thank God for Pepper who dabs at his forehead and makes a swift head jerk to the make-up boy to scurry over and start applying powder. The lights are burning. He never did quite get used to bright lights again. It's all a work in progress.

Tony hears his name under a cheerfully familiar musical refrain, and there's rapturous applause from people who look as though they can't believe their luck to be here. It's more people than he's been in the same room as in years. He remembers the Stark Expos. They seem unreal now. It took the longest time for even sitting in the kitchen with Bruce and Pepper to stop feeling oppressively crowded and now there are people, random strangers, pressed in on all sides. Part of him just wants to run. But Pepper's hand is in his, and he knows that she won't let him fuck this up. Besides, he's a pro.

The clapping dies to a muted, murmured excitement, the audience rapt. They all know what they're here for, but they'll sit for the preamble anyway.

“And today we have a very special guest.”

The host speaks to the audience like they're all, each and every one of them, his very best friend. He's sporting artificially white, straight teeth and Tony's tongue probes at the gaps at the back of his own mouth. At least they got some veneers on him before they shoved him in front of a camera. At least he can smile again without feeling self-conscious.

The host looks like he can't believe his luck either. The bidding war for this exclusive has been out of control. This is the kind of scoop that makes a career. This will be viral within minutes of going live.

It's out now. He can't take it back, can't go back into hiding. This is what he wanted, the validation he needs to feel like himself again. The adoration is suffocating, the lights are too fucking bright, but he needs this, all of it.

“He's one of the heroes of the Battle of New York. We all watched him sacrifice himself to save the city, and for almost five years we thought he was dead. He's a billionaire, inventor, part-time superhero and now he can add space exploration to his resume. Ladies and gentlemen, the Iron Man himself… Mr Tony Stark!”

The audience goes wild. Off-camera crew members are trying to calm them down long enough for the interview to commence.

If Pepper hadn't started walking, he might have stayed rooted to the spot. He finds that it comes easier once he's out in front of the crowd. They love him, they're screaming for him. He's like Jesus, back from the dead on Easter Sunday.

He makes eye contact with a fat middle aged woman in the front row who looks like she's just pissed herself with elation. A kid waves an Iron Man action figure at him. It has two arms. Tony forces himself to smile, bright, dazzling, the way Pepper is.

He's getting into it, all grins and waves and air kisses. He can do no wrong here. He flops down in the armchair, pulling Pepper down beside him by the waist. She laughs and bats him playfully on the (right, intact) arm. There is sudden silence as everyone waits with bated breath to hear a dead man speak.

“So… anyone miss me?”

Epilogue
He's rehearsed it just enough that it sounds natural, off the cuff. In reality, they ran through fifteen different versions of that opener. The host grins, waving his arms in a semi-futile attempt to quell the mass hysteria. Tony can see the marks from his hair transplant up close, the Botox frozen forehead. He laughs over the cacophony.

“I think you have your answer there, Tony!”

The guy’s megawatt grin is plastered to his face as the studio hands calm the crowd enough for them to hear themselves think. Studio audiences are generally briefed beforehand on following direction, but some people are genuinely hysterical. The camera pans to a woman in a t-shirt with Tony’s face on it. She’s sobbing, one hand reached out towards the stage, snot and tears pouring down her face. Fangirls. Most of them are harmless. They screen out the really mental ones, the potential psychos and stalkers, at the point of the ticket raffle.

“It's been your most extraordinary adventure yet, a real survival story. You've been in space for the last four years.” The host’s expression goes serious. “Tell us, Tony, in your own words, what happened up there?”


“So, there was this nuke headed for Manhattan.” He builds it up like a tale of suspense, like one of those paperback murder mystery novels. They hired his old speech writers for this. “I couldn’t let it hit, obviously, so I made a split second decision to toss it through the wormhole— that was a ride I’m telling ya, and a sight! What little boy out there doesn’t want to see the stars up close? Right? But I got so carried away that I missed my ride back and well, you know the story, got stuck on the other side. Lucky for me that bomb never blew. Probably made in China.” A few laughs. Joking comes natural to him and it’s what people want to hear. Nobody cares about the nitty-gritty of asphyxiation.

“Anyhow, I put my thumb out and got scraped up by this Chitauri cruiser. They’d sent most of their guys through the portal already, so they were able to fix me up the spare room. Gave them all the sniffles though and as it turns out my germs kill aliens — talk about a claim to fame!” He snickers and even if it’s a little strained the crowd instantly hoots and claps.

“Then it was all about the right tune: ‘Another One Bites The Dust’. Classic. Me ‘n Freddie, we did ‘em in real good. The rest was just me cozying up until I could get a SOS through to Earth. The Solitaire championship, if you know what I mean.” There it is, nonchalant, easy. One big fat lie after the other.

They are going to ask about the arm next.

“You make it sound so simple,” the host says. God, if he knew. “But it must have been tough up there.”

Oh, you bet your bottom dollar on that, pal.

But that’s the cue. Tony dabs into the Stark Snark.

“Well, it wasn't five star room and board. And space frostbite's a bitch.”

He holds up his left arm where the suit ends below the elbow along with his limb, a wrapper covering the scar tissue. They decided to go with the full amputee look instead of rushing a prosthesis together. Let people see it outright, then they won’t hound him with long lenses trying to get an exclusive of Tony Stark’s mangled stump.

“Tell us, what kept you going all that time up there?”
“Oh, that’s an easy one.” And it is. All hogwash. “Initially I just wanted to get back in time for the NFL playoffs—” The crowd roars with laughter, but Tony quickly puts up a hand. “Don’t spoil me on that, I haven’t watched the vids yet!” Then he leans in conspiratorially and says, “Truth is, I mostly just wanted to get my hands on a cheeseburger and some fries. Some scrumptious American cuisine.”

They show a photo of Tony surrounded by a table stacked full of fast food, fingers and goatee sticky with sauce. Yeah, that one actually happened.

Beside him Pepper clears her throat in mock-indignation.

“Oh yeah… right!” Tony slaps his forehead and everyone laughs again. “And Pepper, of course. Duh!”

“It certainly looks like you managed to keep your spirits up.” The host chuckles, but his smile is a little flat, like he's been hoping for tears and headlines, a bit of serious journalism. What he isn't aware of is that he's been chosen for this because he’s the sort of chump who does puff pieces. Tony's people have vetoed all the heavy-hitters. Hell, even Oprah has been refused access, precisely for that reason.

The host rallies round. “Ms Potts, how was it for you?”

“It was hard,” Pepper says smoothly, holding eye contact. “I'm not going to lie. But I never gave up hope that Tony was still out there.” She squeezes his leg and they smile at each other, all deep and meaningful. The crowd melts. It’s horrendously predictable.

“I'm betting that the lovely Ms Potts was glad to see you in one piece.” The host winks lewdly, utterly oblivious to the fact that he just made an ‘in one piece’ comment to an amputee. The audience don't seem to care. There are a few wolf whistles. “There must have been some fireworks at that reunion!”

“You bet!” Tony laughs, because of course the public is unaware of the fact that his and Pepper’s making-up has lasted over half a year with him unable to get a boner for the longest time. They're still so far off from Happily Ever After it's a wonder they work so well on camera. Tony slings an arm around Pepper’s shoulder and she pretends to look bashful, even manages a blush.

“Hey, you promised me a gentleman never tells...!” she protests.

“Baby, I never said I was a gentleman,” he banters back and it's cheesy, so fucking cheesy, but they lap it up anyway. He plants a tender kiss against her temple and just like that pulls the mood back from Carry On to something sweet and poignant. He hasn't forgotten how to do this.

People are looking genuinely moved. The audience has been picked just right, a good ratio of criers to cheerers. A few women shed tears through their applause. Hands are clasped to breasts. Men nod approvingly. Even the host looks moved, bowing his head slightly with a nod and a smile. Off-camera a roadie points to the clock. There is a strict time limit on this interview. Mr Stark is a very busy man, the story goes. He's officially still in recovery from his space ordeal, despite looking healthy as a horse. Nobody knows that he's been passed along between physio, shrinks and media trainers ever since he got off the island two months ago. The experts are busy round the clock trying to fix up the Tony Stark write-off.

“Now Tony...”

Tony swallows hard, hopefully not too obviously, because he knows what's coming next.
“Can we talk for a moment about your dramatic rescue mission?”

Pepper fields that one. They agreed she would. He doesn't trust himself to talk about Rhodey yet. The official byline is that Steve Rogers and James Rhodes led a two-man rescue operation. The fact that the Black Widow has been killed in action is highly classified information and they've left Bruce out of the narrative completely. SHIELD suggested it, and the doc’s relieved to stay out of the public eye. Nobody will ever know he was up there, all being well.

“It was a tragic accident,” Pepper continues and Tony just nods somberly because that isn’t so hard. They had to doctor with the circumstances of Rhodey’s death. There aren’t any boogeymen in the theatrical release of Tony’s trip. SHIELD wanted to keep the alien side-story under wraps and for once Tony doesn’t mind. In this rendition War Machine kicks the bucket courtesy of a surprise hull breach, sucking Rhodey out into the dead of space. It’s more palatable that way, especially for his parents.

“We're both devastated over Jim’s passing,” Pepper says and it's calm, respectful, just right. “Our thoughts go out to his family.”

The audience is silent for a moment. There’s a place in the American heart for patriotism and fallen soldiers.

“And how's Captain America doing after everything?”

A lot better than expected considering how easy it was to cave his bitch fucking head in, Tony finds himself thinking and doesn't realize that there's a vaguely inane smirk on his face until Pepper squeezes his hand.

“Uh… he's doing great, yeah,” he improvises because he suddenly forgot his lines.

“You guys are close? He was friends with your father, right?”

“Sure,” Tony breezes. “We're bestest buds, really. Steve, pal, if you're watching, it's my place for next poker night. I’ll kick your ass!”

He grins into the nearest camera and ignores the flash of alarm from Pepper that he's gone off-script. Nobody else notices though.

“So, tell us then. What are your plans now that you're back? Are you still in the hero business, or do you think you've earned your retirement early?”

“Tony's going to focus for a while on the company, reacquainting himself with everything,” Pepper says quickly, probably not trusting him to find his way back into the game. Just smile and nod, he thinks, let her do the rest. “There's still an adjustment period and obviously we'd be grateful for some privacy in that time. There’s just so much Tony has missed out on.”

“Ben&Jerry’s named a flavor after me. Stark’s Ravin’ Hazelnuts,” he blurts. He can’t help himself. The ice cream isn’t even good, it’s got this really chalky texture to it. But he’s off-track and now he’s just making up crap.

Pepper’s squeeze increases.

“The bottom line is Tony’s back, and I’m thanking God for this miracle.”

“But listen,” Tony interjects, despite his better judgement. But it's great, they're eating it up, he can
feel it. They're hanging on his every word like it’s the one and only truth.

“Let's get one thing straight.”

He pauses, not so much that it's overly dramatic, but enough. He catches one of the cameras, gives a wink to millions watching him at home. He won't lie; he almost pops a rod at the next five words leaving his mouth.

“I am still Iron Man.”

The crowd goes mental.

Everybody loves themselves a good old superhero story.

THE END

Dear reader, if you got this far please take a minute to share your thoughts with us, even if you find this story completed, years on. We gave you over a 100,000 words -- return the gesture and drop us a line, even if it's just a "Great/So-so/Atrocious Read". We appreciate every comment.

And...we're done.

Thank you for accompanying us over 100,000 words of the way. We want to express our gratitude to every reader who has come so far, be it weekly on Tuesdays from the very start, or newly binge-reading the entire thing. Whether you've been leaving us comments throughout the journey (extra thanks) or been a silent companion all along, we really appreciate you being along for the ride.

This is where our story ends (for now). There will be two more chapters with alternate endings, bits of art, deleted scenes and just generally a bunch of stuff that didn’t make the final story but that we still want to share.

We've had a genuinely amazing time putting this together and we've been blown away by all the reviews and comments you guys have left. We're always looking to improve, so if you've been following us up until now then we'd really love it if you could let us know your final thoughts and any last feedback / concrit you might have, both on the writing and the Easter Eggs (and whether you'd like to see them in the sequel).

And speaking of sequels...
It ended with fanfare, an adoring public, the return of a conquering hero. (It ended with secrets and lies, a broken childhood promise and a line drawn between two sides.)

Then the aftermath. The harsh bright lights of reality. The lure of darker depths. (Then the consequences. Shaky alliances. Desertion.)

The portal cut a rift between Iron Man and Captain America. Everything that followed just ripped it deeper.

spacelaska and chaed present

TILL HUMAN VOICES WAKE US

COMING SOON

Cheers,
Chaed & spacelaska
Chapter Notes

Throughout our journey in Walls we kept wondering how events could have played out differently. The original concept was very much inspired by the classic survival horror game genre and to that end we would like to give you our alternate endings.

*This is all first draft material, so it hasn't been through our normal editing process.*

All's Well That Ends Well

It started with a signal picked up by Jarvis. Bruce did not think much about it at first and let the AI run a thorough analysis while working on his current project for Stark R&D, a new line of clean energy products borne from the late Tony Stark’s concept ideas.

When Jarvis was done Bruce went over the results three times, just to be on the safe side.

Then he took them to Pepper.

The mission was funded out of Virginia Potts’ personal fortune and was volunteer-only. James Rhodes, Steve Rogers, Natasha Romanoff and Bruce Banner stepped up to the task.

“Ma’am,” said Steve Rogers in his old world charm. “If there’s any chance of bringing him back, we will.”

They all owed Tony their lives. If he hadn’t carried the atom bomb through the portal, New York would have become a second Hiroshima. Clint Barton saw them off at the launch site. He walked on crutches, nursing a broken leg after a gone-bad skiing trip with Natasha. And archers in space didn’t make any sense, he said with unerring humor. They had better call up Sigourney Weaver if they wanted someone with experience.

Rhodey touched the craft down in a textbook landing. Even he was surprised how similar a shuttle steered to an F-22. There wasn’t even a scrape on the paint job.

“We’re stable on oxygen levels. You’re good to pop off the gas masks, boys,” Natasha said and led by example.

Bruce illuminated the cavernous hangar bay with his flashlight. The air was stale and smelled strongly of putrescence. Steve, having the best olfactory sense of them all, had the hardest time to adjust. Having the best eyesight too, however, he was the first to detect the source of the stench. Dozens of Chitauri corpses lay neatly stacked against the far off wall, piled one upon another in batches of four. Bruce could not determine a source of death. There were no external injuries. They agreed to be careful, but proceed with the mission anyhow.

“Can you pinpoint the signal source, sir?” Steve asked Rhodey. Although Steve was not active
military anymore he knew not to neglect his education and deferred to Rhodey, who held a higher rank.

“Crisp and clear,” said Rhody, projecting a digital map for everyone to see. “The positioning system works like a charm.”

The GPS estimated their journey at slightly over three hours, but they packed for three days regardless. You never knew what sort of hold-ups might lurk around the next corner. The trek was drawn out but otherwise uneventful. They passed more corpse pyramids and came to a halt in front of an unremarkable set of double doors, which were locked. Rhody checked his HUD for reassurance, but the signal came from the other side healthy and strong.

In the end it was Captain America against a reinforced steel door. That encounter could only go one way and they stepped inside the room with little to no hold-up.

Everyone sucked in their breaths as their eyes settled on the focal point of the den: Iron Man lay spread on a jury-rigged work station, with several tubes snaking out of the suit and into a multitude of different sized containers. A thick layer of dust had collected on the armor’s surface.

They cautiously approached, hoping against hope.

In front of the altar on the floor someone had scribbled in blue colored handwriting:

\[
\text{wake me with a kiss}
\]

Rhody laughed. He claimed they should have brought Pepper, that Tony wouldn’t be thrilled to wake up to a sloppy smooch from anyone else, excluding maybe Natasha. Natasha smirked and rolled her eyes. It was no secret that she hedged a fondness for a certain gamma radiation physicist.

They assembled in a circle around Iron Man, now with new vigor. Rhody, best acquainted with the delicate technology, reached out to disengage the manual locks.

He jumped back with a yelp.

“It electrocuted me!”

Suddenly Iron Man’s eye slits began to flicker, settling in their bright fluorescent red.

A classy English voice said, “Please refrain from touching the equipment.”

“Jarvis?”

“Jarvis System Version 25015-H1,” confirmed Jarvis. “Please enter voice authentication to proceed.”

Rhody gave his credentials. Immediately an affirmative ping resounded.

“Welcome to Fort Stark, Colonel Rhodes.”

“Fort Stark?” Steve raised an eyebrow.

That was so typically Tony, Rhody had little doubt about anything but a good ending now.

“Is he in there?”

“Mr Stark lies in deep-sleep sedation inside the Iron Man armor,” Jarvis said. “I am not to interrupt the cycle unless there is a critical ship malfunction or outer orbit of planet Earth has been breached.”
“We intercepted your SOS signal,” said Bruce. “We’re the rescue team. Does he require medical attention?”

Jarvis projected a hologram of Tony’s medical stats. Bruce took a long, contemplative look at them. “How long has he been like this?”

Jarvis took a moment to calculate. “The current cycle spans four-hundred-sixty-nine days.”

“He’s been under for over a year?” Rhodey was incredulous. “On what sustenance? How is he not starved?”


“You couldn’t have possibly carried four years worth of narcotics on you,” Bruce argued.

“No. We synthesized from available sources.”

“You... what?” Rhodey said. “Are you telling me Tony is on alien dope right now?”

“Mr Stark prefers the term ‘Good Night Smoothie’,” corrected Jarvis blandly.

They coaxed Jarvis into waking Tony up. The ‘booting process’ took the better part of an hour. Jarvis insisted on a gradual weaning; they had bad experiences with the ‘double espresso’ protocol, which led to severe nausea and unpredictable bouts of hallucination. Nobody opposed the AI’s decision.

To further ease Tony’s transition Jarvis asked all members save Rhodey to leave the room. Tony was prone to disorientation after cycles. He was showing worsening vitals with every wake-up call, and Jarvis wanted to avoid negative cardiac reactions.

They waited outside, overjoyed yet tense, the dead Chitauri bodies still an unsolved mystery.

Fifty minutes later Rhodey called them back inside. His expression was one of unmitigated relief.

“Just please be easy on him. He’s very weak.”

Iron Man lay unmoved on the workbench. Only the visor was drawn up to show a haggard, full-bearded face. Tony looked at them from sunken eyes. He was crying.

“I made it,” he croaked. His voice was barely a murmur. He said again, “I made it.”

They all gave him reassuring pats on the armor.

“I never doubted you would, buddy,” said Rhodey and remembered telling Pepper what a good hunch he had had about the mission.

Tony couldn’t walk. Jarvis kept him enclosed in the suit, but it was apparent what a toll the odyssey had taken on him. They carried him to the shuttle, after Tony appealed to Jarvis to put him back under until they were safely home. The next time he opened his eyes, he said, he wanted it to be on Earth.

Pepper waited for them on the tarmac. She sobbed openly as they unloaded Tony from the vessel. It was a reunion taken out of a Hollywood movie.
Tony’s recuperation was long and laced with stumbling blocks. He had trouble adjusting to gravity, to food, to a circadian rhythm. The biggest shocker was his missing left forearm. He’d lost it early into the journey, he said, but did not say how. Pepper handed the company to an underling, while Rhodey took a leave of absence from the military. Once Tony was stable enough to be released from the infirmary they snatched him and retreated to one of Tony’s seclusive estates which Pepper had never had the heart to sell.

With Pepper and Rhodey by his side, he had access to the best support and professional help that existed.

It was a midsummer afternoon, pleasantly warm, good food and good company. Tony forked into a rack of ribs, slick with BBQ sauce. Rhodey and him laughed over the lamest jokes. They were three beers in, and still had plenty set aside. Tony held his bottle with his new custom-fitted prosthesis.

It was good, Rhodey told himself. They had weathered it all, together.

Mama Rhodes was sure to keep their plates full.

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**The Strongest Avenger**

The floor was freezing cold against his bare skin, the scent of copper and something acrid and ripe filling his nose. His skull felt as though someone had shoved an ice pick through his temple, all the way through. His cheek was stuck to the ground in a puddle of congealed blood. He’d been lying there for a while.

Bruce sat up, hesitant, slow. Everything hurt. Bile rose in the back of his throat and a taste like charred earth or sour compost. He bent over, nauseous.

Through blurred vision he glimpsed a corridor awash with gore. Limbs and entrails were strewn about with reckless abandon. He rarely faced up with his own handiwork so closely. He never thought he'd miss waking up in a SHIELD facility, pumped full of sedatives after another Code Green. But here he was, nostalgic for better times.

Natasha was dead. That was the last thing he could remember.

Steve was the first one he found.

He could surmise that it was Steve only from the star in the middle of his uniform. His head had been crushed. What was left was a shapeless, gelatinous mass, framed with red-flecked tufts of blonde hair. Bruce looked at his own bloody hands. Had he been so angry, so anguished by Natasha’s loss? He sat by the corpse for a while as though waiting for someone to happen across the crime scene and accuse him as the perpetrator.

Nobody came.

He thought that perhaps he'd been wandering for an entire day before he came across James Rhodes. He didn't know if it had been him or something else that had gotten Rhodes in the end. Maybe he'd already been dead before they got Natasha to the med bay. He supposed, in the grand scheme of
culpability, that shifting the blame around wouldn't help.

Where claws and appendages had ripped away at War Machine the flesh beneath was gnawed down to the bone. One leg was missing. A trail of crimson evidence snaked away into a busted vent shaft. Something had dragged him off as a snack. The helmet was still tightly latched closed. Bruce didn't have the stomach to pop the face plate. He didn't want to know what James Rhodes' last expression had been.

A sudden terror overcame him. Was he alone on this tomb of a ship? No, no that couldn't be. Surely Tony was still out there. Tony was a survivor. He'd know to hole up and hide. Bruce only needed to find a point of orientation, double back from there and return to Fort Stark, where Tony had no doubt gone to ground.

He wandered, lost, for days before his path lead him back to the med bay.

He almost didn't look in the med bay. He'd only really wanted to see her one last time, even though he had no idea what state she'd be in.

There was a second body in that room, with bite marks on the one remaining arm which had been cuffed to the wall. On average a human survives three to four days without water, a week at most. Judging by the expression etched on Tony's face it was not an easy way to go.

On the floor in front of him, shakily fingerpainted in blood, were three letters.

\[ P E P \]

Bruce stayed with Tony and Natasha for a time. He talked to them. Apologized. Rambled. Sitting on the grubby floor of the med bay he made his last confession to two silent, unhearing witnesses.

The lack of food and water was starting to get to him. Although he was able to hold out far longer than the average human, Bruce couldn't run on empty forever. Eventually the Other Guy would take over, a hideous survival instinct rearing its head. He would have to get moving before that happened.

Bruce shut the door on Nat and Tony's tomb.

It took a while to find and disable the electronic override to the airlock chamber. Not even he could survive the vacuum of space.

He set it to activate remotely.

A thirty second countdown.
Chapter Notes

The masterfile for this story alone spans 1000+ Word pages. There is a lot of scrapped, revised and unused material. Here’s an excerpt.
Thank you to Skedoodle for the fanart submission.

*Scenes as originally roleplayed, or first drafts. Unedited, not proof-read.*

[[first planning session, as remembered]]

C: Hey.
S: Hey.
C: So I had this idea for a RP. You know that movie, the Avengers?
S: Captain America, Iron Man? That one?
C: Yeah! And you know Dead Space, the game?
S: I do.
C: So here’s the sell: Tony Stark in a Dead Space suit. Deep space sci-fi horror. You on board?
S: Bring it on.

[[the original Licker fight scene, dedicated to Joss Whedon]]

C: Was she seriously… knives? He couldn’t believe his eyes. They were fighting futuristic bio-tech monsters with medieval toys? One of the Lickers got its tongue around Cap’s ankle and flung him against the walls like a human yo-yo. Romanoff was way out of range with her butter knives. It was comical to the point of terrifying, because the only one who got as much as a tickle out of their adversaries was War Machine and he stood no chance if the two monsters decided to gang up on him.

“J, give me—” Tony swallowed the rest of the sentence. Jarvis was but a chip in his pocket. He was facing five inch claws with nothing but a sweaty layer of Under Armor and four suicidal Avengers brawling about the sequence of who got to be appetizer first.

On impulse Tony pushed himself off of Banner’s restraining arm, doing the doggie crawl past a wicked-looking set of teeth, limboing under a tongue and ending up on the other side of the hallway, arms cradling around the object of his desire.

Tony actuated the RPG’s trigger, aiming for the ceiling. The recoil knocked the air out of him but also chiseled a considerate chunk out of the ceiling. It collapsed on one of the lickers like a deadly cuddle blanket. How was that for a lullaby!

“Time to—”

Go? Apparently not. He had a second to realize something was clamping down on his good arm. When had the twins turned into triplets? He went through the motions of mop job before #3
introduced him up close and personal to a crack in the ceiling.

Coach, call in a time-out! Next thing he was aware of was lying face down in Romanoff’s cleavage. Tony was pretty sure they hadn’t advanced to that stage of a relationship yet, so he hastily scrambled off soviet property. That was when something heavy struck him, pinning him right back into the thick of the action.

Tony had never been one to decline a threesome before, but this particular proposal hinted at way too much tongue involvement.

C: just a little (involuntary) Iron Widow for your morning coffee
S: Ahhhh oh my God this is glorious

S: Bruce Banner was not often completely and unwaveringly certain of many things. Partly because he was a scientist and partly because of his nature he generally tended to doubt things, to look critically at all available possibilities before drawing a conclusion. But if there was one thing that he was instantly and irrevocably sure of, it was that Tony Stark was a fucking moron. After they’d come all this way to rescue him he was going to spite them all by getting himself killed.

Between Cap being thrown around like a rag doll, Tony involuntarily motorboating Natasha and the fucking ceiling caving in around them, the only person who seemed to be making any traction was War Machine. Bruce was vaguely aware that he was still clutching a rocket launcher. He began fumbling with the straps, pulling the thing close and, mercifully at last, managed to work out which way round to hold it. Guns generally had safety catches, didn't they? Did rocket launchers have them? Was this even a rocket launcher? He wasn't completely sure. He began running his hands over the weapon, looking for some kind of catch. He was almost certainly going to blow his own leg off with this thing before he managed to kill any monsters.

Then the creature emerging from the rubble snaked its tongue out and grabbed Cap by the ankle, dragging him towards its mouth and sunk its teeth into his thigh. The next thing Bruce knew, he'd pressed the trigger and a… bullet… missile… rocket thing… ?… had launched itself into the nearest wall, blasting an enormous hole there and causing sparks to fly from exposed wiring. At least the noise from the explosion made the creature drop Steve.

C: Something big exploded right next to him and the blast force lifted Tony out the Kremlin's uncharted depths and into the nearest wall. He managed a stifled “oomph” enunciating it with the mortification of a man who had not been privy to bedtime activities in far too long and had just now barely avoided ending up the lucky pierre in a spontaneous human-alien wham bam.

Clearly, the trauma was amassing at a rate his system couldn’t stand pace to.

To make matters worse the first thing he focused on was (again) Natasha’s rack. She had been catapulted on top of him, which meant their tongue happy friend couldn’t be very far off. Natasha worked on getting back to her feet, a task which, to Tony’s open horror, included a fair amount of groin kicking. Her efforts were cut short as the human pyramid got topped by one Steve Rogers, pressing down on them with all the weight of an outgrown bull.

Tony squeezed a desperate “help” from in between the twin Tatyanas. If Cap, Natasha and Tony were busy doing a menage-a-trois, then who the hell kept the monsters in check?

Surely War Machine had to be rolling on the ground with laughter by now.

[[on cliffhangers and flashlights]]
S: While we're on the subject of deep dark confessions, I'm also quite a fan of flashlights as plot devices.
C: oh man! The flashlight! We've been totally neglecting it! I don't care how far you get in revamping 13, but if there's not a mention of the flashlight when I check it tomorrow I'm gonna be disappointed.
C: Optionally also some descriptions of corridor lighting. Creepy lighting.
C: And silence.
C: A lot of awkward silence.
S: Maybe we can have the flashlight illuminate some creepy shadows and the effect is so creepy that everyone is stunned into awkward silence?
S: (no need to call me a genius, I already know I am)
S: We should basically end the fic there because we're not going to top that.
C and the last Easter Egg should be SHIELD retrieving the Chitauri ship and finding the flashlight... still on.

[[cover art]]

C: Mojave desert was the devil’ sauna. They’d been sitting in a ramshackle excuse of a safe house...
for three hours now, broken air conditioning and lukewarm bottle water included. Banner looked like he was going to hulk out any minute, Director Fury’s eye-patch absorbed the pearls of sweat lining his own forehead and Steve had developed a nervous tick that showed every time someone uttered the word ‘tentacle’.

“I’m telling you—” he repeated, narrating the events that led up to Natasha’s death; the zero-G zoo visit, walking medieval torture devices, hybrid alien mollusc-canines.

“Yes, you’re telling me!” Fury snapped back, slamming a fist on the desk. The water in Steve’s bottle wobbled. “You’re telling me how Tony Stark gave the stomach flu to the galaxy’s most intimidating army four years ago and how you, faced with a ship full of Chitauri corpses, still managed to get two of my best people killed by the aliens’ pet pug!”

Beside him Maria Hill typed up the debriefing transcript. Tap-tap-tap, her fingers moved across the keyboard. Steve took another chug of his water. He wouldn’t put it past Fury to have killed the AC on purpose.

Three levels below them Tony Stark was a slab of meat on a state-of-the-art operating table, getting pieced back together by SHIELD’s finest. Steve bet they had it nice and cool in there, not chewing on Mojave dirt while bickering out the details of a come-to-life Lost In Space scenario.

Fury turned to Banner then. “And you? You haven’t said a word in, what, two hours, now?”

“Hundred-twelve minutes, sir,” Hill provided.

“Not a word in hundred-twelve goddamn minutes,” Fury said. “My puzzle pieces don’t fit, Dr Banner. Align them for me.”

S: “Speaking of puzzle pieces,” Bruce said, his voice hoarse from the heat and a splitting headache coming on from listening to Steve prattle on and Fury yell for the last, well, hundred-twelve minutes, apparently. “He’s going to need an osteotomy now.” He said and nodded vaguely in Cap’s direction.

“You should have let him get medical attention first. Enhanced healing doesn't mean everything necessarily heals in the right place. Some poor SHIELD medic is going to have to break and reset his jaw, if you still want him on your promotional material.”

He didn’t particularly care about Cap’s jaw. He just wanted to see if Fury would look guilty, which he didn’t. He just looked pissed off.

“You gave Natasha something that disrupted the entire ship’s electrics. It lead to all the contained surviving monsters getting out...” He glared at both Fury and Maria and didn't miss how Maria’s fingers hovered above the pistol at her belt at the short display of anger. “And they weren’t pets. They were engineered bio-weapons. Nobody stood a chance except for—”

He shut his mouth and met Cap’s eyes. To his credit Steve had left out that part of the story so far. He wondered if that was a silent bargain, a quid pro quo on the understanding that Bruce would leave out the part where Steve had broken Tony’s arm, chained him up for hours with a corpse and his own severed hand and subsequently dislocated his shoulder. But then Tony had broken Steve’s jaw and tried to cave his head in. Maybe it was best to just keep quiet about the whole thing.

“Can I go now?” he asked.

C: “Go?” Fury echoed. “Why yes, doctor, there’s the door. You go out, take a left at the intersection — are you taking me for a fucking ride here? The only place you’re seeing is two levels deeper: decon, hazmat pat-downs and being combed for extraterrestrial lice. This isn’t your favorite aunt’s
afternoon tea party and book presentation, Banner!!

Steve gave Bruce the I-told-you-so look, but it was lined with less guile and more commiseration. They were going to go through summer camp together.

Fury turned to the two-way glass. “Get me someone from aeronautical down here ASAP. I want to know how we’re going to haul in an alien Silverado without the Russians throwing a tizzy.”

Hill snapped shut her laptop. “You’re cleared for medical now.”

Fury was going on in the background on how PR better get their asses in motion and get on top of things about how to handle a Chitauri media hysteria. “And I want Legal off the leash,” he ordered. “Hourly reports on Stark. And for the love of mercy judge, keep him away from anything electronic when he wakes up. I don’t want to eat my breakfast cereals watching Ellen Degeneres comment on his latest Facebook update.”

Hill ushered them out of the room and into the nearest elevator. Steve noted the SMGs hanging from their shoulders. Fury wasn’t taking chances on this.

S: “And I thought I had anger issues,” Bruce muttered under his breath. “You know that if we’ve picked up anything contagious, you all have it already. You can't keep me anywhere I don't want to be.” That elicited a few satisfyingly nervous looks and possibly some mild disapproval from Cap. He’d take it.

But he went along with them anyway. Partly because he had no intention of losing control and breaking out and partly because he wasn't sure of where he'd go if he ran away now. And also because he wanted to know how Tony was doing.

“You should call Pepper,” he said to Maria, thinking out loud. “She should be here. For when he wakes up.”

Maria didn't say anything, just nodded for them to keep going. They carried on walking down the corridor in some hideously brightly lit sub basement structure. The dull fluorescent strips and the lack of natural light made him feel ill, like they were back on the ship, or like he was about to be buried forever in a military facility somewhere. He could feel a sense of rising panic and he stopped for a moment to take a couple of deep breaths.

C: Decon hadn’t changed a lot since the 1940’s. Long decontamination corridors, water shower deluges, high pressure fire engine hose downs. By the time they were through Steve had disinfectant in his inner ear canal, shed about three layers of skin and was now proud owner of a newly minted trauma concerning soap bars.

Medical delivered the grandiose news that his jaw had to be physically reset, as per Banner’s prediction. The serum had mended the bone, but without proper immobilization it had healed wrong. If he wanted to articulate his S’s and C’s and R’s without sounding like a gimp he’d have to go through a medically indicated version of Stark’s baton drill. After further interrogative sessions, naturally.

The next meeting was set up in a four-eye, double mirror fashion. Fury, Hill and a few other select SHIELD inquisitors had him recite the mission chapter and verse. Who had done what, where, when, how. Why had he let Stark tag along when he was obviously incapacitated? What exactly had been the extent of Romanoff’s injuries? Could she have been saved if Banner hadn’t lost his cool? At what point had he felled the decision to abandon Rhodes to his fate? They reinvented themselves and their questions until Steve wasn’t sure what he’d said or hadn’t, and what were hard facts or foisted
assumptions.

The game went on for hours. He held no doubts that Bruce Banner was quizzed in the same back-breaking fashion and for once hoped that the issue would resolve itself with some smashing. After a while Fury grew bored or frustrated or both, and Steve was dismissed. A guarded escort and a polite request not to leave his quarters later he slumped, exhausted, on the $50 mattress and fell asleep instantly.

[[on transitions]]

S: ok, so actually I think up until them finding the shuttle locked, it's flowing ok
S: we need a transition between that scene and them finding chitauri!tony
C: definitely
S: I could knock together a paragraph of them walking around, some more description of the different types of light bulbs on the ship because that's in my opinion the main point of interest for the reader
C: we need to make fanart for the lighting system
S: While we're on the subject I want bruce's flashlight instated to main character status
S: with a whole spin off series
C: we'll put it in the tags under characters
S: of course, anything less would be an insult
C: we should also totally gay pair it with Jarvis
S: oh my god hot tool on AI romance

[[the first out of about five Pepperony reunion attempts. A naive take.]]

C: Tony smoothed out a fold in the button down. It wasn’t Armani, but it had to do. He was a little downhearted how the material dropped around his shoulders, how his neck jutted from the collar. He hadn’t looked like this on the cover of Forbes. It was a look that did not suit him.

They had given him a buzz-cut upon check-in. It’d grown out a little, but was still too short around the sides. There was too much grey; in his hair, his skin, his beard. It made the dark under-eye circles stand out like he might go for a nose-dive any second.

He sighed, accepting it, dismissing it, moving on. There was a far bigger point at issue than his absent playboy tan. His absent left hand for example. That was going to be a much bigger bait for curious eyes… frankly, for anyone who had eyes in their head. SHIELD had supplied him with a generic strap-on prosthesis which Tony had experimented with for all of two days. It was a stumbling block, big and clumsy and giving him a chafe within minutes.

He focused back on the mirror. The left sleeve hung spiritlessly off the stump. He took the sleeve and tried it folded up, tucked behind, stuffed under. Bad, worse and impossible. He’d already skipped the tie in lieu of not being able to bind it one-handedly.

Disgruntled he abandoned the task and grabbed the suit jacket, pulling it over the stump, up his shoulders and— the goddamn cast on his right arm didn’t fit inside the suit sleeve.

The suit ended up in a heap in the corner, right next to the plastic hand. Fuck it. Fuck this. He was going to own it by being his fucking self and not relying on fucking props and fucking midrange-price clothes to impress Pepper after four fucking years in fucking space.

He shuffled to the door like a zombie in aggro mode. He knocked and the door opened. Bruce was
“I’m ready,” Tony muttered and began to shamble down the corridor towards the elevator.

S: After four years, three months and sixteen days Virginia Pepper Potts was standing on a temporary helipad in the middle of precisely nowhere, South America, waiting to pick up the most important cargo in the entire world.

She’d imagined this moment so many times, in so many different scenarios. In her head, he’d always been a little bedraggled, a little worse for wear, the way he’d been when he stepped off that plane from Afghanistan. But the emaciated, deathly grey, stooped figure that shuffled into view was so unrecognisable that she thought, for a moment, that there had been some kind of mistake and that they hadn’t found him after all.

Then she met his eyes and it was him, it was really him and she rushed forward to embrace him until something caught her eye and stopped her short in her tracks. Her hand flew to her mouth and tears pricked at her vision as she took in his missing limb, her stomach churning as she tried to process what she was seeing.

“Oh Tony...” she managed. “What...?”

C: The flight was interminable. Tony switched from annoyed to grouchy to exhausted somewhere over the border. He kept playing it over in his head, what he’d say to Pepper, how he’d act, how she’d react.

Then they finally approached, a nondescript slab of concrete in the middle of nowhere, South America. Tony picked out Pepper’s form long before they touched down. She stood there, charming and able, a killer queen on impossibly high heels.

They shuffled out of the chopper and he did his damn best to keep a straight back and act like a corset wasn’t the only thing keeping him upright. He took slow, deliberate steps. It looked like an invitation for her to approach. He hoped she didn’t notice that he was just out of breath. But she took the bait. Pepper closed in and she was every bit as much as Tony remembered her. Not a day older.

A glass figurine.

She smiled and he returned it, but then hers went upside down and she faltered in her step. Her eyes locked on the empty sleeve. He suddenly felt self-conscious. He didn’t want her to stare.

“Hey,” he said and her eyes snapped up. She was trying to reorganize, he could see it. “I missed you. The traffic was terrible. I’m sorry it took so long. But I made it.” He opened his arms a little. “Do I get a hug?”

S: She stood and stared, trying to adjust to the fact that it was Tony’s voice coming out of this shell of a person. She mentally rebuked herself. He’d been gone for years, God only knew what he’d been through in that time. But here he was, still cracking stupid jokes and that alone made her hopeful that this wasn’t just Tony, this was still her Tony. And there would be time, so much time, for the other conversations, the blanks that needed filling in, the part where they would have to unpack, slowly and carefully, the last four years and the damage that had been sustained. On both sides.

Half laughing, half crying, she threw herself into his arms. His suit was cheap and scratchy polyester and he smelled like disinfectant and supermarket-bought soap, and she could feel the way his bones jutted out at funny angles under his ill-fitting clothes. But underneath all of that he was still him and he was here and warm and alive and that was all that mattered. She buried her face in his shoulder and began to cry in earnest, huge, gulping sobs of relief.
S: I feel like this is bruce's role in the team. Pointing a flashlight at things and asking people if they're ok
C: When they're obviously not
S: Yeah like oh hai nat, you seem to have just had your throat ripped out by a monster...how you holding up there?

S: They'd settled into a fairly comfortable routine. Pepper was there most of the time, although Stark Industries business sometimes took her away for a couple of days at a stretch. He supposed that running one of the largest tech companies in the world didn't exactly lend itself to a hands-off approach. But she never seemed to want to leave Tony's side and she called Bruce multiple times a day for updates (because they'd all agreed that Tony couldn't be trusted with a smartphone yet). He suspected she was really just calling to make sure that Tony was still there; Bruce hadn't missed the way she'd tense up every time he went anywhere alone, even if she was trying not to let it show.

So with Pepper being away, Bruce had finally relented to making lasagna, despite that fact that by this point he might as well have torn up his diet plan and thrown it in the bin, given that all Tony seemed to want to do was catch up on all the junk food he'd missed. With the lasagna in the oven Bruce had thrown a concoction of various green things in a blender, proclaiming that if Tony was going to refuse to meet his 5-a-day quota of vegetables in a sensible way, then he could get it all out the way in one go.

Laying out forks on the table, he turned around and plonked the green liquid concoction in front of Tony. “This first, then lasagna. That's the deal.”

C: With Pepper away on SI business Tony had mentally planned out the two days until her return. While beer, junk food and binge watching four years of NFL championships made the list, the…
thing in front of him certainly didn’t.

He gave the glass a skeptical probe. “What… is it?”

It certainly did not match any criteria of Tony’s perception of food. Smell and consistency alone were deterrent. Bruce could have just as well asked him to stick a finger down his throat and commence projectile-vomiting without the foreplay.

“I’m going on a hunger strike,” he declared and pushed the mug away. He made a beeline for the oven, where the lasagna, bubbly mozzarella on top, enticed him from its sweltering cage. “That’s what I want.” He pressed a finger to the glass, just so there wouldn’t be any misunderstandings. “That and beer.”

Bruce didn’t twig.

Tony laid out the facts. “Landlady’s gone. We’re having a bro’s night. ‘I’m gonna pretend that’—”, meaning the nuclear fallout blendie on the table, “—never happened. Now please tell me there’s a hidden stash of alcohol somewhere.” He’d snooped around earlier, without success. Bruce and Pepper were sly about where they buried the goods.

S: Bruce rolled his eyes in exasperation. Sometimes dealing with Tony was like trying to talk a five year old into eating their spinach. Or in this case, drinking it. “You're not having alcohol. No. That's a terrible idea,” he said.

But then again, his recovery was going fairly well. And a part of Bruce felt constantly guilty for being the guy who kept telling Tony that he couldn't do things, that he couldn't be normal when clearly, that was all he wanted to get back to. Would it kill him to have a beer?

Probably not, Bruce reasoned, and clearly Tony was determined to badger him to death until he relented. Besides, Tony Stark could smell weakness like a shark smelled blood in the water, and Bruce wasn't great at saying no to people at the best of times. He'd already caved on the lasagna; he was on a roll.

He began to backtrack. “One beer. Or a glass of wine. You can choose which. But with food. And you have to drink that smoothie first so that, as your doctor, I can tell myself I did one thing right today. And if you tell Pepper I gave you booze, I'm calling Director Fury and telling him to come and pick you up first thing tomorrow.”

He pushed the smoothie towards Tony for emphasis. “I'll be back in a minute. I want that gone by the time I get back.”

C: “Aces!” Tony called after Bruce, smoothie dutifully in hand. He brought it up to his lips in case Bruce was going to peek from around the corner. God, the thing turned his stomach just smelling it. Once no more footsteps could be heard Tony took the only sensible decision: he chugged the mug’s contents down the drain.

Then he devoted his attention to more important things, like securing the lasagna from the oven. He dished out two hearty portions and after a second, more thorough evaluation added another heap to his own plate. The Leaning Tower of Pisa. Perfect. To round it out he emptied the fridge of appropriate addendums; ketchup, parmesan and a side order of Coke. It was every bit a cardiologist’s nightmare.

He frowned a bit at Bruce’s arrangement of forks. Obviously the man wasn’t privy to the correct way of pigging out on junk food. Tony augmented spoons, so they could appropriately shovel it in.
Bruce returned with the merchandise and Tony beamed as he realized that one beer had turned into a six-pack.

“My man! I knew it! I’d say two each for starters? Three?” He waved with the cap opener. “Bring ‘em here!”

S: “Are you serious?” Bruce looked at the pile of junk that Tony had already amassed on the kitchen table and the heart attack on a plate that he was about to devour. “I'd prefer if you managed to hit your target weight without getting atherosclerosis.”

He took the bottle opener from Tony, if nothing else to stop him from doing himself an injury in his haste to get at the beer, sat down at the kitchen table opposite Tony, opened a bottle and slid it across the kitchen table. Already he was regretting bringing the entire sixpack. At least Tony had drank the smoothiep.

Opening one for himself, he poured it into a pint glass and picked up his knife and fork. He noticed that Tony was already shovelling down his mammoth portion with the aid of a spoon and the air of a man who’d never seen food before in his life.

C: Tony had demolished half his lasagna and was now putting serious effort into the Lager. A cursory glance over at Bruce’s end of the table revealed a devastating situation.

“Why aren’t you done with your first one yet?” he asked with an emergency as though their lives depended on it. Sobriety definitely did. And his plans for the evening included getting wasted, extra points if he could pull Bruce along for the ride. At this rate Pepper would be home before they even crossed into tipsy.

Tony poured himself a second one. “You keep up that speed I’ll have all remaining ones myself,” he warned, squinting deviously at Bruce. “And we both know you won’t stop me. So, for my liver’s sake, step up your game.”

S: It was official. Tony Stark was a fucking horrible influence.

How was it even possible that, after four years in space deprived of alcohol, he seemed to be able to hold his booze better than Bruce? They’d spent the past hour or so getting steadily shitfaced and talking in increasingly animated terms about various ideas for engineering projects. The six pack had long since been demolished along with a second and now, against his better judgement, he just staggered to where Pepper had hidden the scotch (and trusted him with that information, no less, to prevent this exact thing from happening) and had retrieved it with two glasses.

But he felt good. He'd forgotten what it was like to feel this relaxed. If he squinted and didn't think too much, things almost felt normal, like they had before his accident. Not that he'd been a social butterfly then, either, but it was the kind of peace that you didn't miss until it was gone forever, replaced with the strain of constantly keeping himself in check. But the Other Guy seemed content to slumber for now and he let himself get carried away with Tony's general enthusiasm for life.

“You can pour.” He sort of thrust the bottle in Tony's general direction. “It's really good scotch an' I don't trust myself not to spill it.”

C: “Whoa, pitcher, watch your throw!” He barely caught the bottle before it hit the floor. Maybe he had more tolerance than Bruce, but his time of walking a straight line had been over after beer number seven.

Tony poured two glasses. He pushed one to Bruce, then decided that, what the hell, and filled his
own to the brim. Some of the liquid swapped over as he raised to a toast.

“To Rhodey and Nat!” he said, but in the same breath decided: “You know what, no, fuck them. We’re here, right? Paradise island? Not gonna feel bad about it. I’d much rather drink to that.”

He gave a brittle laugh. “And maybe a bit more luck with my senorita, right?” They’d been here for weeks and he still hadn’t landed a hit with Pepper. Nothing. Nada. Lights out. And then her mainland trips, New York this week, Los Angeles next week, SI here and SI there.

“You think she got someone? Some vanilla stockbroker? Lawyer?” He’d made her into one of the richest women of America. There had to be contenders. And the way she looked at him sometimes, the disapproving glance, the worry, the outright horror when he let slip some detail of his journey.

“I want her,” he said, then realized that might not have come across the way he meant it. “I had Jarvis play me old recordings, phone calls, whatever we had on local memory, really. I’d get those weird dreams, you know, where you think you’re awake but you’re not? And if they were bad trips they really fucked with my cycles because there was only so much J could do to compensate. Until he started playing audio while I slept, too. Pepper’s voice worked best. Calmed me.” He looked up at Bruce, took another sip of scotch. “I think I need her more than she knows. I really don’t want to fuck it up.”

S: Bruce stared at the amber liquid in his glass as he listened, taking another sip, even though the sensible part of him was telling him to slow it down. “You should tell her that,” he said. “Stuff like that… you should let her know.”

He leaned forward, elbows on the table, propping his chin up against his hands. “She never stopped looking for you, not really. Not even when they had a funeral for you— which I went to by the way. It was very tasteful, you’d have hated it.” He closed one eye, focusing on Tony. “I mean, we weren’t close, Pepper and I, but I was around and she was so determined to get you back. People were saying she was going to run the company into the ground because that was all she could focus on. But even after, once she got more of a balance, she never gave up looking for a way.”

He took his glasses off and dropped them on the desk, closing his eyes for a moment because honestly, the room was spinning a little. “Talk to her. Don’t fuck it up.” He blinked a couple of times and frowned in confusion. “Hang on, unless we’re talking about you getting laid here in which case… I have zero advice on that front.”

C: “That’s right pal, Tony Stark is trying to get advice on how to get laid— from the Pope of all people.” He raised an inquisitive eyebrow at Bruce’s crotch. “Seriously, there’s nothing going on there? What about the Other Guy? You always lose your pants after, so I never got to… you know…see… does he? … is there…?” He made a vague gesture. He’d always wondered, but never found the right moment to ask. A dozen beers and half a bottle of scotch later seemed as good a time as any.

“And when you’re sober we really need to talk through my prescriptions. I was thinking something along the lines of less calmants and more… Viagra? Cause the last time I jerked off was… in space.”

S: “What… what the?” Bruce went wide eyed, turning bright red. He shook his head and took a large gulp of scotch and tried to unravel the series of very inappropriate and more than a little bit confusing questions that had just been thrown at him.

“I’m not like a Ken doll, if that’s what you’re asking. It’s all in, uh, in working order? I just don’t want to risk anything that might mean losing control. Especially around someone else. You just learn to live without it.” He drained the rest of his glass. “As for the other guy… that doesn’t even bear
thinking about. Luckily he seems to want to channel his energy in other more… smashy directions, as far as I know.”

He poured them each another drink. “And no, I'm not getting you Viagra, for crying out loud. But if you're experiencing...” He cleared his throat and winced at the mental image of Tony Stark jerking off in space. “…um… erectile dysfunction, it should clear up as you're weaned off the meds. You won't be on a cocktail of drugs forever.”

C: Tony brightened at the prospect of less drugs and more action. ‘Wean off’ translated into ‘you can stop to take your meds tomorrow’ in his head, which would then leave him with about 24 hours to sober out, both alcohol and pills, and give the infamous Stark Hot Rod a trial run before Pepper arrived, assuming the annoying side effects got lost instantly. Which they better had. He didn’t own two kidneys and a liver because they were nice accessories. They had better work for it.

He took the new scotch, noticing that the contents of the bottle had mysteriously… evaporated. In fact, the whole house looked like it’d been victim of an elephant stampede. The TV was running on mute, the kitchen was a war zone, empty bottles were everywhere and Bruce looked like he would either puke or pass out in the next five minutes.

Tony leaned back contentedly. Win-win on all fronts.

S: The lights were on, but the house was unusually quiet as Pepper made her way through the front door. It was permanently unlocked, of course, the benefit of being on a private island. She wasn't due back until the next day but the idea of being apart from Tony always made her anxious (when she wasn't governed by a military secrets NDA she'd have to see about making an appointment with her therapist) and she'd pulled a few strings and moved up a few meetings to clear her schedule.

Stepping through the door, the first thing that occurred to her was that the place smelled like a distillery. The kitchen was in total disarray, sheets of paper with drawings and schematics and things that even Pepper could tell were total manic nonsense scrawled over them, empty beer bottles littering the floor and dining area. There were splodges of what looked like bolognaise sauce all over the floor in a trail from the microwave to the table where someone had clearly attempted to reheat leftovers and then given up on eating them.

Worst of all though were the two figures slumped at the kitchen table, an empty bottle of scotch between them. Someone had been sick and missed the trash can; probably Bruce, judging by the fact that there was a slightly bent pair of glasses lying in the pile of vomit, although Tony didn't look as though he was exactly the designated driver for the evening either.

“What the Hell?” she exclaimed, loudly enough to rise Bruce from semi-consciousness. He winced and sat up, propping his head in his hands.

“Ooh Jesus.” He looked up at Pepper and his eyes went wide as he registered her presence. “Ooh Jesus. Is it morning?”

She ignored him with a glare, shaking Tony by the shoulder. “Hey… HEY!”

C: He must have passed out for a moment because the next thing he knew someone had him by the shoulders and went through the vain attempt of shaking sobriety back into him. Tony jerked awake with something between a grunt and a snore and the world kind of slanting to the right.

He blinked into view a cleavage, a very familiar cleavage. Pepper’s cleavage. Tony stared like an idiot until his brain delivered the helpful reminder that he might want to refocus a couple inches above that spot. Which turned out to be a less than brilliant idea because the pout on Pepper’s lips
wasn’t sexy, it was murderous… which was kind of kinky in its own way if he gave it a second thought.

Realizing that he was still holding on to the empty glass of scotch he dropped that in favor of something more full-bodied, like Pepper’s ass. Before she could object he pulled her down into his lap and tried on his most innocent expression, which Rhodey had once dubbed the baby-seal face.

“Hi… do I get a smooch?”

S: “Oh God.” Pepper landed at an awkward angle in Tony's lap and pushed his face away with the palm of her hand, wrinkling her nose at the booze fumes coming off his breath. “You stink.”

She disentangled herself and surveyed him, bleary eyed and pulling a face which, under normal circumstances she might have found adorable. Ok, so he was still a little bit adorable, all rumpled and tipsy and smiling up at her like that. But it didn't change the fact that she couldn't believe what the Hell she'd just walked into.

“I leave you both for five minutes and this is what happens?” she demanded, crossing her arms over her chest. “And you, Bruce. I thought you were at least more sensible than this.”

Bruce squinted at her for a few seconds, began to apologize, then caught Tony’s eye and started giggling. “M'sorry,” he slurred in between laughter. “It was only s’posed to be one beer.”

She counted twelve beer bottles and a large empty bottle of the scotch she’d bought in for Rhodey, before she knew what had happened to him. No wonder Bruce had been sick. It was a wonder either of them were still conscious.

She eyed Tony with concern. “Is it even safe for you to be drinking?”

“He's fine,” Bruce offered, interrupting her with an expansive wave from where he was slumped. “He was hooked on alien crack for four years, the man's got the constitution of… of… of something with a really strong constitution.” He closed one eye. “I dunno… an elephant?”

C: “I’m not an elephant,” Tony countered. He looked back at Pepper and contemplated retracting his last statement and ask her if she wanted to check out his trunk or something equally ingenious. No wait. He could do better.

Parking his chin on Pepper’s chest, he looked up at her with all the seductive prowess still available at his level of intoxication. “I’m a space whale. I have the constitution of a space whale.”

He laced a grabby hand around her neck, pulling her into a hit-or-miss french. He hit, but just barely. It was good though. He was good. He was a god. Pulling away to be commended for his talent he cast a sideways glare at Bruce.

“Get lost, third wheel. We’re having a moment here in case you can’t tell. I’m making out with my girlfriend.”

Attention back on Pepper Tony waggled his eyebrows. “Are you ready to experience the intergalactic ride of your life?” He bounced the knee she was sitting on. “Let me be your space whale, babe.”

S: Pepper pulled herself away from Tony's scotch-and-lasagna flavored kiss and tried to keep a straight face while she glared at him. “Space whale? Are you serious? That's the worst pick up line I've ever heard. Even from you.”
“Third wheel...” Bruce looked drunkenly crestfallen, tried to stand up to comply and promptly tripped over his own feet and ended up falling back into his seat.

“Just stay where you are,” she called over her shoulder at Bruce and disentangled herself once more from a drunkenly amorous Tony. “Trust me, you are not getting laid tonight.”

She got up and went to the kitchen sink and filled two pint glasses with water. Returning, she slammed them down in front of Bruce and Tony. “Drink. Both of you.”

It was hard to be mad, she decided. Even though clearly this was stupid, reckless and irresponsible, it didn't really make the top one hundred stupid, reckless and irresponsible things that Tony had done in his life. And maybe he'd needed to let off steam. She glanced at Bruce, who was obediently, if sloppily, drinking his water and looking thoroughly ashamed of himself. Maybe they both needed to. Holding up the empty bottle of scotch, she frowned at Tony. “You couldn't have at least saved some for me?”

“There's wine in the super secret hiding place that Tony doesn't know about, the one in the cupboard behind the toilet paper.” Bruce whispered very loudly before adding. "Also I don't like space whales."

C: Tony didn’t want water. Tony wanted Pepper. And maybe a glass from the super stash. But mostly Pepper.

“Pep, Pep, Pep.” Granted, it had sounded a lot less mono-syllabic in his head. His supreme courting had trouble making it from brain to tongue. He came up behind her, wrapping both arms around her waist and began to rock against her to a rhythm that was a queer mix between Sinatra and Guns 'n Roses.

“So you don’t want a space whale, huh? Should I turn green and smashy? Or are you more into patriotism? Star spangled with a plan?” His eyes widened, mischief glinted, and he put on his best Asgardian accent. “Or are you in need of a hammer, milady? Big and… mighty?”

S: Tony somehow managed to make being obnoxiously drunk into something cute and she couldn't help but smile slightly as he wrapped his arms around her from behind. The fact that he was almost falling over couldn't dampen the moment. How many times had she been stressed and worrying about something only for him to come up behind her in the kitchen back in Malibu and do the same thing, cracking some stupid joke and talking relentlessly until she'd started laughing and forgotten why she'd been so uptight in the first place.

Spinning round, she laughed at him. “Gross. Tony, that is gross. No space whales. No Avengers. Just you. Tony Stark.” She ran a hand through his hair and grinned at him. “Who is an idiot, and who's going to have a hell of a headache in the morning. But whom I love anyway.”

Bruce, whose face was buried in his forearms, mumbled something unintelligible from the corner, apparently still conscious, if only barely. She turned back to Tony.

“You need to go to bed,” she smushed a finger over his lips before he could come out with any more innuendo. “Solo. To sleep.”

C: Her finger pressed against his lips and he kissed it sloppily, twirling one of his own through her hair. He was swaying her towards the bedroom, away from Bruce and his uncertain fate.

“I'll do it,” he promised with feigned sobriety. “Be a good boy and go to sleep alone.” He wanted to make sure she was aware of the gargantuan sacrifice she was asking of him.
“If… you take a shower with me.” He grinned, amazed by his own top-notch negotiation skills. She could hardly pass up on that deal. They reached the bedroom and Tony stumbled over the threshold, using Pepper to catch his balance.

The bed suddenly seemed a lot more enticing. It was also closer than the bathroom, which was favorable seeing how staying upright was getting harder by the minute. “I got an idea… we save the shower for the morning and…” He trailed off, having lost the thread on his monumental grand scheme. The edge of the bed pressed against his calves and the rest was gravity's work. He plopped back, sprawled out like a sacrificial offering to his goddess, Pepper and the world spinning in ceremonial circles.

“Alright, I’m ready,” Tony declared, fumbling with his fly and pulling open the zipper. Gold-red Iron Man boxers - his favorite - peeked from underneath. “Get it on. Take me. Don’t hold back.”

S: Pepper just stood there with her arms crossed and one eyebrow raised as she let him ramble and watch him collapse back on the bed. As he took multiple attempts to get his fly open, she rolled her eyes and helped him out of his trousers, so he was lying there, all messy hair and rumpled t-shirt and quite possibly the most egocentric boxer shorts in the world. It it wasn't for the fact that he wasn't quite as 'ready' as he seemed to think, she'd have momentarily considered giving him a hand job to put him out of his misery.

Instead, she straddled him, carefully, without actually putting any of her weight on him, his hips between her knees and her forearms propped on either side of his head and she looked down at him, smiling broadly. “I’m not an idiot, Tony.” She kissed him on the lips lightly. “I know you have at least seven broken ribs.” She moved to his earlobe. “And that you’re not supposed to be getting physical for another few weeks.” She left a light trail of kisses down his neck and stopped at his collarbone. “Besides, you smell like a brewery.”

Abruptly, she climbed off him and dragged the comforter over him, tucking him up up to his neck and planting an affectionate kiss on his forehead. “Sorry, hot stuff. I said you were sleeping solo and I meant it.” Sitting by the bed, she stroked his forehead and ran a hand through his hair.

“You're gonna feel like Hell in the morning,” she whispered with a chuckle. “But I'm glad you had fun, at least.” It was objectively quite hard to be annoyed at the situation when he was here, and alive, and doing an impression of quite possibly the world's most adorable drunken idiot.

[[on tagging]]

C: you know what, I'm just thinking about all the tags that have to go on this thing. Explicit gore and violence needs to be in all caps.
S: we should just tag it fluff and wait for the complaints to roll in
S: "Lost in Space". Tags steve/tony, fluff, romance. Steve saves Tony from a Chitauri spaceship, but oh no, there's a power failure! It's awkward at first, but then they set up home together and adopt a pet spider monster and realise the depth of their feelings for one another.
S: rated: general

[[unfinished photoshop project on the Tony Stark Super Bowl]]
[[on the importance of research]]

C: I have no experience at all with American football, I hope all those terms are right.
S: I also have no experience with American football. So much so that I thought it was about baseball.

[[on our secret, the ambiance]]

C: don't you just love how the second sentence of 14 is "As if on cue, the lights flickered."?
S: the lights are a secret main character
C: it's like, this super hidden Easter Egg. Figure out the main character death hinted in the tags.
C: It's the lights.
C: The lights continually dying.
S: they were crying out for help the whole time and nobody noticed
C: People will blame Natasha for it, I bet you

[[Tony waking up for the first time back on Earth]]

Remember the pain and the haze and the darkness?

Newsflash: they were all back. A laudable sequel, the critics on Rotten Tomatoes would say. A-1 for continuity.

There was even a juicy, new plot twist: Pain had called it quits, was looking for a new orientation in life, had left haze and darkness for Tony to beseech into a mind-blowing threesome. Mind-blowing,
get that pun?

The three of them were so into it that Tony scarcely escaped from their clingy grasp. Whenever he was out for a breather, they’d pull him right back under the covers.

It was a very taxing relationship.

At one point Tony thought he understood why pain had felt the need to bail for freedom, but then the haze and the darkness were all over him again, and he could do nothing but bend to their will. When he finally managed to squeeze through the peephole called consciousness, it was to the most annoying sensation ever: He really, really needed to pee.

The urge was overpowering, like when you sit up ramrod straight in the middle of the night and don’t know if you’ll make it to the bathroom in time. Tony tried to sit up ramrod straight in the middle of whatever time of day it currently was, only to realize with a not inconsiderable amount of dread that the only parts of him having escaped his affair with the haze-darkness were his mind and his bladder.

In the end he just let it go. God knew, he’d done worse things in his life than going number one without a urinal in sight. And it felt heavenly and blissful and a bunch of other adjectives combinable with deliverance. Right up until the relief morphed into a sharp jolt of pain, which drew all the way up his urethra and squeezed out his kidneys like a moist dishrag.

Three letters materialized at the forefront of his mind: UTI. In his youth UTI had been a synonym for girls giving Tony the slip in favor of ibuprofen and a heating pad. He’d never suffered from urinary tract infection up until his retreat in Afghanistan, when Raza had confiscated his cot over the age-old Jericho dispute. Three days into it Tony would have built him a rocket to the moon in exchange for a silver strip of Bactrim and a knife to clip out his own kidneys. Well, Raza was dead now and Tony, to his knowledge, still had both kidneys, so all was well. Let that be an allusion to the whole And They Lived Happily Ever After topic.

What the now receding pain did was kick his ass out of the haze-darkness. It began with the cautious lifting of his left eyelid, which yielded no result, took a weird detour through his arm — it lifted, but only a little — before his right eye eventually fluttered open only to start blinking and tearing from the light that violated it.

“Hello Tony,” said a voice that could have been clipped from that one slasher movie with the psychotic puppet. “Easy,” continued the voice, as if it was afraid that Tony would tie his shoelaces and line up for the LA marathon.

He opened his mouth to allay suspicion, only to realize that his tongue was a hump of sand in the gritty Sahara desert. He began to cough, and managed to choke on what little spit had been in his mouth.

This woke up a new part of his body: his chest.

He’d been in the gym with Happy, pumping ‘em out, maybe getting a little overconfident in his own abilities. Take it easy, Happy had said, you ain’t no Ronny Coleman, boss. Tony had stacked the plates on regardless. He was Iron Man. He lifted tanks for a pastime, he’d told Happy, he could handle a couple heavy reps just fine. Then he’d dropped the barbell on his chest and prayed to God that Happy would shut the fuck up laughing and save him from being crushed by his own gym equipment.

That was pretty much what his chest felt like now — crushed on Bench Press Monday.
He managed to emit a noise that might have sounded like, “Ngngh.”

The ominous voice picked up and said, “Try to relax, Tony. Breathing might be a bit hard.”

You don’t say.

He dialed it down, found a rhythm that allowed him to exert his chest as little as possible. He thought he was ready for another round in the sheets with the haze and the darkness. They’d surely put out a search warrant for him by now.

“That’s better,” lauded the mystery voice.

He wasn’t sure if they shared the same definition of ‘better’. The more parts of Tony came online, the more he wished for a good old-fashioned smack to the head. He tried again to relay this intention to the outside world and ground on the desert sand in his mouth. He made a sound in the back of his throat.

A second voice said, “That’s enough for now,” (close it, Natasha, he’s not making it) and put him back on the right path.

Oh, there they were, his old friends, the haze aand thee dark ne-


Pain kicked darkness out of the threesome for a grand return. Tony advanced from ‘Ngngh’ to ‘Oompfh’. It never rained in Southern California, but sometimes there was a moist sponge in his mouth and he sucked on it greedily before rubbery pincers took it away.

“I’m no Ronny Coleman,” he tried to say, but nobody lifted the barbell off his chest.

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UTI? Not urinary tract infection. More like, U THRASHED IT, boy. As in, you atomized your chest and pelvis. This revelation came much later in the timeline, but it was one of the first articulate thoughts Tony remembered having.

He came to while they were cleaning him. There was the sponge in his mouth and cold latex gloves prodding at sensitive parts. They lifted him, turned him, pulled crudely at his limbs. He opened an eye. It was very bright. They were many. Their hands felt like ice cubes atop the smothering oven that was his front side. He looked down on a landscape of hills and valleys painted in vibrant reds and purples and blues. Three features stuck out: off-center RT, bleach smell, holyfuckthatwasyourhip.

“Give him some more,” said God or the Devil or the Almighty State.

Yesyesyes, thought Tony and plunged eagerly into the haze’s puffy embrace.

There’s a nuke headed for Manhattan. You have to stop it.

YOU.
The joke’s on YOU.

Hardy-har-har.

and heads go a’rolling a’ rollin a roooooll

“Tony. Tony, open your eyes. Have a go at it. You can do it.”

He coughed. Opening his eyes was a pipe dream. Machines beeped rhythmically, not at all correctly portraying his mammoth struggle. He was so very floaty. Maybe at one point he did squint. The voice kept talking. His own tongue was dead meat in his mouth. He couldn’t move. It was hot and cold and itchy.

“You’re a fighter, Tony. You’ll pull through. You’re home now. You made it.”

He made it. Slowly, sluggishly, not faster than one chipped canine at a time, but he made it.

[[on Brutasha]]

S: I'm tempted for one last brutasha moment but honestly it would feel too clichéd to do the whole "hey once we get out of here let's grab coffee..." then she dies thing. It's as bad as "cop a week away from retirement solving this one last case"

C: yeah, lets not squeeze in too much brutasha. we've left breadcrumbs, we don't need to make it a fucking wedding cake.

[[on writing tricky scenes]]

C: there's not really a way to tone it down, even if we wanted to. what is there to tone down about death?

S: i mean well, there's death and then there's showing a man's inner thoughts while his head gets ripped clean off his shoulders and his best friend watches

S: or like, a guy watching as someone uses the mutilated corpse of the woman he loves as monster bait while said other headless guy gets his brains eaten out

S: like it's hardly dying in your sleep surrounded by your grandkids

C: okay, yeah, way to stick it in my face thanks.

[[on sequels]]

C: I kinda want to find out what's next...

S: Then lets.

Works inspired by this one: [Survivors Who Doubt Their Survival](#) by DumpsterDiving101

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